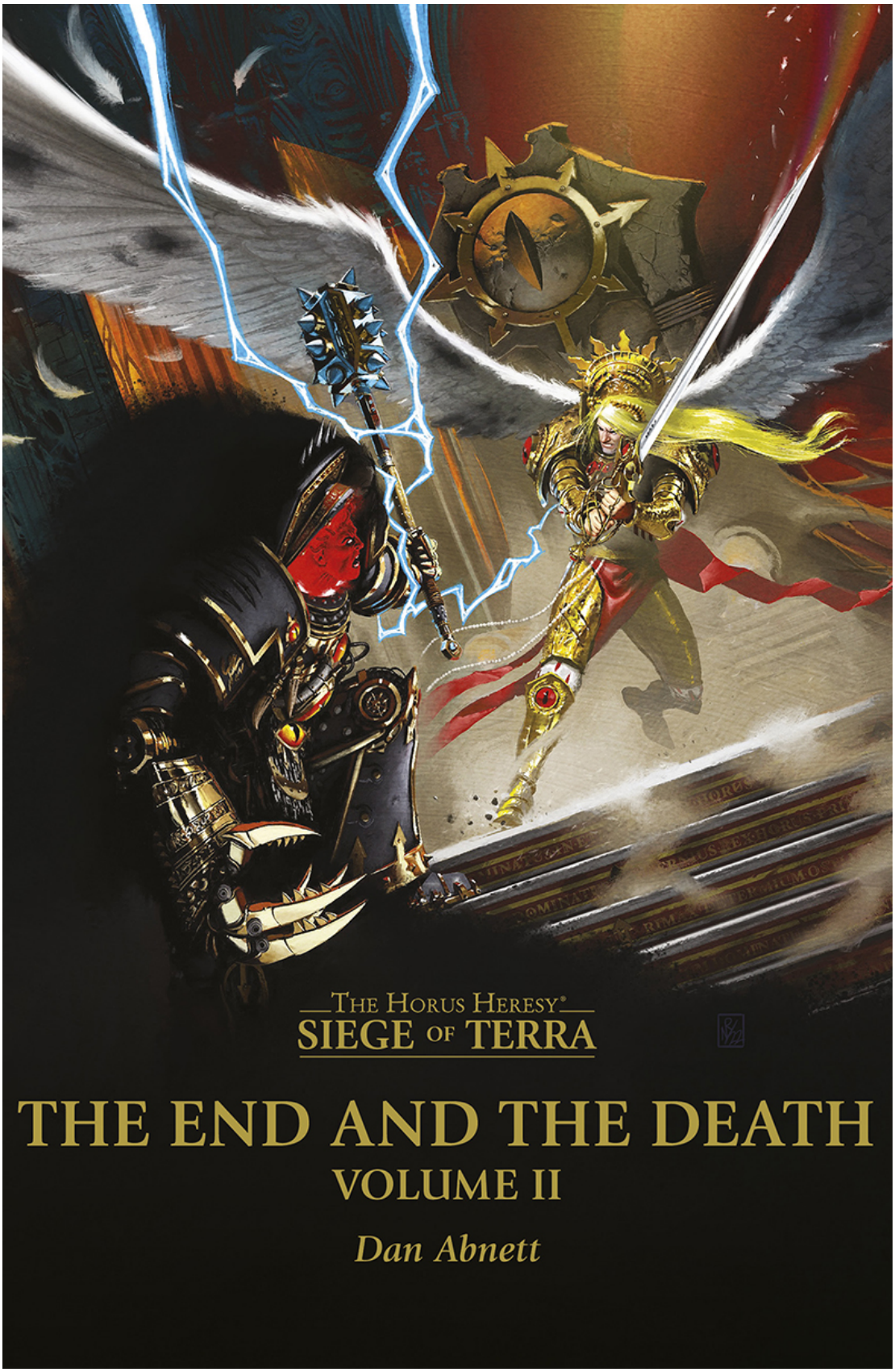
THE HORUS HERESY®
SIEGE OF TERRA

THE END AND THE DEATH
VOLUME II

Dan Abnett



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SIEGE OF TERRA

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions, are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to

the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The end is here. The skies darken, colossal armies gather. For the fate of the Throneworld, for the fate of mankind itself...

The Siege of Terra has begun.

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THE HORUS HERESY®
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VOLUME II

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Constantin Valdor – Captain-General of the Legio Custodes

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Sanguinius – 'The Great Angel', Primarch of the IX Legion
Vulkan – The Last Guardian, Primarch of the XVIII Legion

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Ios Raja – Hetaeron Companion
Caecaltus Dusk – Hetaeron Proconsul
Uzkarel Ophite – Hetaeron Proconsul
Dolo Lamora – Sentinel-Companion
Ludovicus – Proconsul Hykanatoi
Symarcantis – Warden
Xadophus – Warden-Companion
Karedo – Tharanatoi (Hetaeron)
Ravengast – Hetaeron Companion
Taurid – Hetaeron Sentinel
Nmembo – Hetaeron Companion
Zagrus – Hykanatoi (Hetaeron)

Aldeles – Hetaeron Companion
Meusas
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Kaledas – Prefect
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Amon Tauromachian – Custodian

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Srinika Ridhi – Knight-Centura of the Clouded Leopard Cadre

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Moriana Mouhausen
Gallent Sidozie
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Jonas Gaston – Junior

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Nemo Zhi-Meng – Choirmaster of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica
Eirech Halferphess – Astrotelegraphica Exulta of the Higher Tower

The VII Legion 'Imperial Fists'

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Fafnir Rann – Lord Seneschal, Captain of the First Assault Cadre
Fisk Halen – Captain, 19th Tactical Company
Val Tarchos – Sergeant, 19th Tactical Company
Maximus Thane – Captain, 22nd Company Exemplars
Leod Baldwin
Calodin
Lignis
Bedwyr
Devarlin
Mizos
Honfler – Praetor-Captain
Kolquis – Veteran
Noxar – Veteran
Berendol – Huscarl
Molwae – Initiate
Demeny – Initiate
Tamos Roch – Vexillary
Guil Conort
Sigismund

The V Legion 'White Scars'

Shiban – Khan, called 'Tachseer'
Sojuk – Khan
Namahi – Master of the Keshig
Hemheda – Khan
Kyzo – Outrider
Ibelin Kumo

The IX Legion 'Blood Angels'

Raldoron – First Captain, First Chapter
Azkaellon – Herald of the Sanguinary Guard
Taerwelt Ikasati – Sanguinary Guard

Zephon – Dominion, ‘The Bringer of Sorrow’
Nassir Amit – ‘The Flesh Tearer’
Lamirus – Sergeant
Sarodon Sacre
Maheldaron
Meshol
Dytal Maegius
Zealis Varens
Krystaph Krystapheros
Rinas Dol
Kystos Gaellon
Khotus Meffiel
Satel Aimery
Khoradal Furio
Emhon Lux
Malix Hest

The Shattered Legions

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Odi Sartak – Captain, VI Legion ‘Space Wolves’
Tjaras Grunli – VI Legion ‘Space Wolves’
Aerim Lur – XIX Legion ‘Raven Guard’
N’nkono Emba – Pyre Warden, XVIII Legion ‘Salamanders’
Rewa Medusi – Sergeant, X Legion ‘Iron Hands’

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Tragan – Captain of the Ninth Order
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Kyril Sindermann
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Eild
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The Traitor Host

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Ulnok – Equerry to the First Captain
Azelas Baraxa – Captain of Second Company
Kaltos – Second Company
Tarchese Malabreux – Master of the Catulan Reavers
Hellas Sycar – Master of the Justaerin
Taras Balt – Captain of Third Company
Tyro Gamex – Third Company
Vorus Ikari – Captain of Fourth Company
Xhofar Beruddin – Captain of Fifth Company
Ekron Fal – Centurion, Justaerin
Kalintus – Captain of Ninth Company
Selgar Dorgaddon – Captain of Tenth Company
Zistrion – Captain of 13th Company
Jeraddon – Captain
Yrmand – Captain
Phaeto Zeletsis – Praetor-Captain
Arnanod – Sergeant
Gustus – Justaerin Terminator
Varia – Justaerin Terminator

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Vorx – Lord of Silence
Kadex Ilkarion
Caipha Morarg
Melphior Craw
Skulidas Gehrerg

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The VIII Legion 'Night Lords'

Khagashu
Lucoryphus – Raptor

The XV Legion 'Thousand Sons'

Ahzek Ahriman – Sorcerer

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Eyet-One-Tag – Speaker of the Epta War-Stead linked unity

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Andromeda-17 – Selenar

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INTERLUDE

THOSE WHO BEAR WITNESS

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i

The Dance Without End

A masque has come to Ulthwé, the first masque since the Fall.

It has come without summons, like a gift: a harlequinade of the Rillietann, the first seen in centuries, stepping from the slanting light of a far-angled gate, and walking in silence through the wraithbone chambers of the craftworld to the Ovation. There, without preliminary or overture, they start their performance.

The asuryani of Ulthanash Shelwé gather to behold it. Some ask, What is the meaning? Is this a blessing, or a portent? Some ask, What is this dance?

Eldrad Ulthran knows. Though the Harlequins have remained hidden in the webway since the Fall, wards of the Laughing God Cegorach, their dance has never ended. They have danced in seclusion, maintaining the old masques, such as *The Penumbral* and *The Leering Moon*, and adding new ones, such as *The Dance Without End*. He has never seen that masque, but he has heard tell of it. It is the great rite of lament, added to their repertoire during the years of seclusion, for it depicts the tragedy of the Fall.

Eldrad comes to the Ovation to stand with the others and watch. The Ovation is his favourite place on Ulthwé. Of great compass, it is the only

chamber on the craftworld that feels as though it is outside. Here, there is a wide span of sky, a soft sunset, and a broad tract of eitoc grassland nodding in an idle breeze. A ring of soft beige rocks surrounds the grassy bowl of the stage, a kilometre wide. The shadows are long and the dusk muted. All of it is simulated. Psi-engram circuits in the wraithbone deck and soaring dome manufacture this environment from memories, and optical fields make the space feel even larger than it actually is. He stands among the rocks with the others, watching the dance, feeling the remembered sunlight, smelling the recalled scents of eitoc and the wildflowers. Around the imagined horizon, evening thunder rolls, and lightning prowls. But the noise is not thunder, and the blink-flash is not lightning. It is the crackle of active gates far away, around the edges of the room.

The dance is a spectacle of the highest theatre. A full company, troupes of mimes and jesters, of warlocks, of light and shade and in-between, led by their master Harlequin, all clad in dazzling domino suits, all vizarded in the false-faces of their chosen agaith. And with them, the blue shade of a Solitaire, signifying the prestige of the piece. They move across the floor of the grassy bowl in a choreography that is both surgically precise and as fluid as water.

When the dance ends, the dancers promptly begin again, repeating the entire sequence.

Word spreads. Despite the mounting anxiety and the desperate measures of preparation being undertaken across the aeldari diaspora, emissaries come to behold the masque. The first harlequinade since the Fall is a thing of true significance, and must be witnessed. The emissaries arrive through the far-angled gates. They come from craftworlds scaling for reactive war; from others fleeing at maximum impeller towards the galactic hem; from precious crone worlds raising their defences; from shuttered maiden worlds hiding their most precious thoughts in soulglass flasks; from Exodite communities withdrawing to their covenanted places of safety. No matter the crisis, the masque must be attended.

Then no one comes. Sudden squalls of immaterial horror boil and spill through the far-angled pathways. Transit is no longer possible. The old ways are blocked. Eldrad orders the gates closed. Those who are here must remain. Those who have not yet arrived may never come, and many may have been lost en route.

Eldrad has expected this. He is reluctant to admit that he had not, however, farseen it. In the past weeks, farsight has progressively clouded and dimmed, blocked by etheric tumult just as transit is now blocked. The future is either hidden from asuryani eyes, or it is no longer there.

Nechrevort, the emissary of Commorragh, is last to arrive before the gates close.

The Guardians close in at once at the sight of an envoy of the aeldari's reviled and degenerate cousins.

'I come to witness, unbladed,' she says, her scarified palms raised, her smile lethal. 'Will you deny me?'

'I will deny no one,' Eldrad replies, 'not even an eladrith ynneas. The masque is for our blood, where ever it runs.' He signals to the Guardians to back away.

'I think our blood will run,' she says, as she walks beside him through the nodding grass towards the Ovation. 'Yours, farseer. Mine. Don't you?'

'Your tone is prognosticatory, Dracon Nechrevort. I thought the drukhari had no truck with the farminded arts?'

'We need no farsight to see the doom come upon us,' she replies. 'The mon-keigh have outdone themselves. They will drag more than their own kind to annihilation.'

The masque has been underway for nine days. On the Ovation's stage, the whirling figures of the company shape agonies and ecstasies with formal precision and sinuous grace. They tumble in the air like birds, they flutter like leaves, they spring and bound, and curve around each other. The domino suits shine and flash, iridescent. When the dance ends, they begin it again, repeating the same suite of symbolic movements.

The sky is carved from smoke, and the breeze tastes of sadness. Eldrad and the kabal dracon join the onlookers on the rock rim. Eldrad sees autarchs look away, shunning the drukhari. He sees exarchs scowling at her presence, and Exodites moving to stand apart. None make menace, for to do so would be to abuse the hospitality of Ulthwé.

The emissary of Iyanden shows no compunction. She steps close to Eldrad, despite the dracon nearby.

'What have you seen?' she asks him, quietly, as they observe the harlequinade.

'Nothing, Mehlendri,' he replies.

‘Have you looked?’

‘You ask me that, Silversoul? I have looked. There is nothing to be seen. This you know, for, from the fear in your eyes, I know you have looked too. Nothing is visible, and even if it was, what good is it to us? To farsee is to know the yet-to-come. What use is sight alone?’

‘Anticipation, always our virtue,’ replies his visitor. ‘To farsee is to read the path, and from that the steps may be changed.’

He looks at her.

‘I love you for your trust in that,’ he says. ‘Yet I hate you that you still cleave to that idea.’

‘Anticipation has won me many victories,’ she says.

‘Perhaps.’

‘I have farseen defeats, and changed the steps so that Iyanden has arrived instead at triumph.’

‘Have you, Silversoul? Or have your Aspects simply fought harder and prevailed?’

She frowns. ‘I lament to hear the great farseer speak so ill of his art. Why would the asuryani be given the sight to read fate if not to change it?’

‘Because life is cruel,’ he replies.

‘Eldrad,’ she says, ‘I came to Ulthwé to consult you, for Ulthwé sees further than any–’

‘You came to see the masque,’ he says, ‘and that is enough. The Harlequins come from seclusion to dance for us. That tells us all we need to know. A great catastrophe passes through the stars. We will be lucky to survive it.’

‘We have farseen its coming for years. Now it is upon us, there must be something we can–’

‘*Now* you counsel for action, Iyandeni? When the asuryani have spent years condemning any involvement with the mammals and their wars? We knew they would burn out. We saw that much. This is how it happens.’

‘But on such a scale, Eldrad? Yes, we farsaw their fall. But we underestimated their potential for destructive spite. Their home world, now the focus of their final grief, sinks like a hot coal through the silk of creation and spills the warp. Our sight has dimmed, and the Harlequins come to dance. That can only mean their final fall will be a second fall for us, consuming all.’

‘Then run, Silversoul.’

‘Iyanden runs, Ulthran.’

‘And Ulthwé cannot. We are lodged in the scar tissue of our own mistake.’

‘So you would… give up?’

He turns from her. In the pale air of the simulated sunset, he sees other emissaries nearby watching their exchange with interest. He sees the amused smirk of Nechrevort.

He claps his hands three times.

‘Stop the masque!’ he commands.

The dancers falter and stop. On the Ovation’s stage, the Harlequins glare at him from behind their startling masks, some crouched low, about to spring or spin, some lowering outstretched arms. Only the nodding grasses stir.

Eldrad stands in the moth-light, and extends his arms. His robes melt into vapour. His armour comes to him, soft ribbons of glassy colour that bind and settle upon his limbs and body until he is tight-cased in the aspect of war.

‘I will tell you what I have seen,’ he announces to the gathered luminaries. ‘I will tell you what I have done.’

The Harlequins hiss, and huddle in a lithe mass, arms around each other.

‘Once, behind us on the trodden path, there was a great people,’ he says, ‘of mighty accomplishment and sharp supremacy, who inherited the stars and all that webs between–’

‘Do not school us, Eldrad,’ objects Kouryan of Biel-Tan.

‘–and in their supremacy and accomplishment, they foresaw where their path would lead, yet they did not change the steps or turn aside.’

Mehlendri glares at him, offended. ‘Recite not our shame as though it is an argument against our art,’ she says.

‘Our shame?’ he asks.

‘You speak of the asuryani, in the time before She came to quench her thirst upon us, and this is known, and this is mourned. But it is no argument. Our loss, though the greatest of all losses, simply reinforces the necessity of our craft. What we farsee, we act upon. What is yet-to-come, we recompose. This is the bitter lesson of the Fall. Our pride blinded us. We have heeded our farsight since–’

‘The story was not ours,’ Eldrad replies. ‘I was speaking of another, the younger kind. Their steps are the same, as though they have learned the

same dance from us, and now perform it with us, a duet, echoing every move.'

'They are low things,' snaps Jain Zar. 'They are a million years behind us. They seek to ape our past glory, but they will never rise to such refinement. They will wipe themselves out, as a thousand other kinds have done before them. We have avoided their outgrowth as much as we can, and kept out of their affairs. They will soon be gone.'

'Very soon,' Eldrad agrees. 'What concerns us is the manner of their passing.'

He looks at them all.

'For generations, we have farseen the damnation of the human – yes, let's call them what they are – the damnation of the human line. These upstarts who, nonetheless, have forged an empire worthy of the name. Their vigour has surprised us. We have watched them repeat the same hubristic mistakes we made. We have awaited their inevitable ruin, for is it not the fate of all species that harness the power of the mind to affect their destiny? I warned of this, Ulthwé warned of this, but you refused involvement. I chose to ignore that decision.'

There is a murmur of dismay.

'I have manipulated certain parties in an effort to head off this disaster, for I knew then what you know now. Not only the human line shall perish. My efforts, over years of careful agency, have come to little. Some of my actions have been ill-judged, and I have trimmed the skeins of fate to correct them as best I can. But I have tried. Now you protest, in your woe, that it is time to take action. It is too late. The one called Horus Lupercal wields too much power for us to stand against him. I have one principal agent left in play. He has ensured that the forces opposing the Lupercal have one great champion more than they would have otherwise, the so-called Promethean Son. My agent may be able to do more, but I fear not. Our sight is dim because there is no future to observe. We have no choice but to see out the policy you determined, to let them burn, and fight back the flames of conflagration if they come too close to us. Or, if fate is cruel, and the human line does not end itself, then we will prepare to resist a broken species fuelled by Chaos. We have no choice now but to wait. The Harlequins come to dance for us, *The Dance Without End*, to remind us what we are capable of enduring, for we must endure again, and weep, for it

is only proper, the passing of a sentient kind.'

'Fine words,' says Nechrevort, breaking the silence that follows. 'But incorrect in one detail.'

'How so?' asks Eldrad.

Nechrevort gestures at the recoiled Harlequins.

'That, High Farseer of Ulthwé, was not *The Dance Without End*,' she says.

'Tell me what you mean, drukhari.'

'I have seen the dance,' she says. 'The Harlequin troupes may not have left the far-angled ways since the first breath of She Who Thirsts, but they have danced their masques in High Commorragh.'

'For you alone?' asks Jain Zar.

'We made no secret of it,' says Nechrevort, 'but none of you seemed to want to come. You would have been welcome. We are not savages. We can honour the terms of masque-truce as well as you. Still, my point is, I have seen *The Dance Without End*. Three times. And each time I wept in shame and fury at what was lost of us all. I know the steps and forms. This is not that dance.'

'Of course it is,' says Eldrad.

'It is very like, I agree, farseer,' she replies. 'The forms of it, the structure, and many of the steps. It follows the same pattern. It has the same number of performers, the same distinctions of light, dark and twilight troupes. The four mimes are still daemons. The Death Jesters are still the harvesters of mortality. It depicts the fall of a race, and the birth of a god. But these nine troupers do not represent the old race. And the Arebennian Solitaire does not represent She Who Thirsts.'

'No,' says Eldrad. 'You are mistaken.'

'Am I?' asks the drukhari emissary. 'I wish I was.' She looks over at the Harlequins. 'What is the name of this dance?' she asks.

'It is *The Dance of the End and the Death*,' hisses the troupe master, the words awkward as though he has forgotten how to speak.

'And what role does the Solitaire play?'

'The one that shall be born,' replies the troupe master with a growl. 'The new god.'

Eldrad feels a chill upon his skin. It is not a simulation of the room. How has he not seen this? Or has he just refused to see it because the implications are too terrible?

‘What is the name of your role?’ Eldrad asks the hooded soloist.
‘The Dark King,’ the Solitaire replies.

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ii

A mote of discordia

Mars listens. Mars watches. Mars waits.

There is never silence here, only a constant, low hum of readiness and patience. All things work in one coadunated, holy purpose, all sounds blend into one sound. It is the bass throb of sacred data-rivers flowing through the hyper-cooled cores of the mass cogitators, creating and constantly updating a model of divine reality. It is the purr of the deep-set reactors, sunk like wells into the planet's mantle, generating and regulating colossal power. It is the moan of wind sawing the high-tension cables that support the sensoria dishes, each up-turned like an open flower, each ten kilometres in diameter, each cupped in a precision-drilled crater across the red rock of the Lantis Planitia, the single most massive detection array in the Solar Realm.

It is the crackle and cluck of radiation monitors on the scorched surface, and the scrubbing whir of environmental processors in the measureless red-lit vaults. It is the motion of a billion adepts and magi moving through the chambers of the forge like lifeblood through the chambers of a body, each with a dedicated task to perform, each task unified with the rest. It is the rumble of idling drive systems that comes, like distant thunder, from the

numberless bulk conveyers suspended like impossible islands in the seared blue of the Martian sky, or clustered like suckling aphids around the docking spires of the Ring of Iron; a fleet to rival that of the Warmaster, but built to reconstruct and re-forge. It is the throb of immaculate standard templates held in stasis archives. It is the ceaseless binharic murmur of the noosphere, linking every last component of the True Mechanicum, the whispering voice of Mars, speaking from and to all things, soothing, reassuring, enlightening, exact, omniscient.

Mars waits. An entire priesthood culture, the perfect fusion of god machine and spiritual organics, synchronised across a city the size of a continent which modifies the face of Mars like an augmetic implant, dedicated in every specification to the true and real Omnissiah that has finally been revealed…

Mars waits for the word. In the very heart of Olympus Mons, Kelbor-Hal waits to give it.

The Fabricator General, sleeved in a temple-cocoon of filament wires and data cables, suspended in noospheric rapture, observes the oceanic mass of data. The cupped dishes of the Lantis Planitia are his eyes, the networked swarm of orbital auspex nodes his ears, the sky-tilted augury systems and prognosticators his pulse. He observes, parsing the data-current, meticulously appraising even the smallest and most insignificant unit of code. He does not sleep, for he needs no sleep. He registers no impatience, for impatience requires a contrasting capacity for patience, and those are vestigial organic qualities he has long since had excised, along with his limbs, his principal organs and his teeth. There is no frustration, no trace of the fretful urgency that would torment an organic. There is merely a binary synthesis of passive and active states.

Passive, he waits and ingests data. Active, he notes the passage of time, the lack of response to his communications. Passive, his dish-eyes study the raw lesion of light that now occupies the astronomical position of Terra in the heavens. Active, he records the increasing loss of data-definition in that area, the cessation of signals from the Warmaster’s invasion fleet, the interruption of reliable analysis of the Terran surface warzone, the steadily increasing levels of immaterial radiation. Passive, he monitors as the mass cogitators scrutinise the spectra of these new energies, and decide on names and definitions for them, and projects their interaction with realspace

dynamics. Active, he reviews the last signals from the Warmaster, the complex terms of their negotiated treaty, and the resources he has agreed to facilitate.

Kelbor-Hal will not dishonour his pact. The True Mechanicum will not dishonour its pact. No detail of the arrangements will be left incomplete.

When the Lupercal signals that the deed is done, the compliance of Terra achieved, and that obscenity the False Emperor overthrown, the Fabricator General will give the word, Mars will mobilise, and the waiting fleets of bulk conveyers will set out for Terra to begin the reconfiguration and restoration of the Throneworld.

He notes, in his personal thought-archive, that the deed is taking longer than he anticipated, and longer than the Warmaster boldly estimated. The siege drags on. It has lasted nine point seven months, relative, longer than Kelbor-Hal's initial projection. The False Emperor and his forces have displayed intensely stubborn levels of resistance, though that in itself was a variable the Fabricator General had presumed. Kelbor-Hal has never underestimated the False Emperor. Though defiantly secular, allowing for no shred of spirituality, the so-called Master of Mankind had come to the Red World in the guise of a god. This was a knowing act, confessing no divinity, but suggesting it, the true triumph of faith over proof. The Mechanicum had accepted the Emperor as the Omnissiah Manifest, and he had made no effort to deny that idea, for it suited him to have Mars worship and follow him. This had caused the Schism, a crisis of faith from which the priesthood had barely recovered. But in those dark days of division, new secrets had been learned from the logi-stacks of forbidden vaults. Some, the hereteks, had called it scrap code, the contagious meme-words of abominable intelligences, but Kelbor-Hal and his loyal magi had recognised the truth in it. The scriptures of Moravec had revealed the true word of the Omnissiah. The Terran Emperor was no god incarnate. Kelbor-Hal had used the scripture code to unite and heal Mars, to unify and repair it, to link it in one manifold absolute, and to build the new, True Mechanicum from the ruins of the old theocracy.

Kelbor-Hal will not permit the False Emperor to deceive his kind again. Mars will prevail, holy and divine, and Terra will fall, taking the Lord of Heresy with it.

He watches carefully. The levels of gross realspace trauma afflicting the

Terran location as a by-product of the compliance are also higher than his initial speculated models. Realspace fabric is eroding and collapsing at an exponential rate. Nineteen new forms of xeno-etheric energies have been identified. He wonders if there will be anything left at the end. He wonders if there will be any fragment of Terra remaining from which to rebuild. Perhaps the remains of Terra will be left so toxic and ruinous that the entire site will need to be abandoned, and the new Throneworld raised on Mars instead. That would please the Omnissiah.

He waits. Mars waits. They are the same thing, priest and world synthesised into one symbiotic entity, poised and ready, singular in faith.

The constant hum alters slightly. It is an infinitely tiny sub-harmonic shift that only he can detect. A minute variable. An error in a single unit of code.

Curious, he locates it, draws it to the surface of the data-sea for inspection, as one might select a single grain of sand from an ocean floor. It is a tiny aberration, one single proto-cell of data misaligned with the rest of the reality organism. At first, he cannot define the nature of its error. He adjusts his noospheric appraisal, and deploys higher levels of analytic scrutiny.

It is a tiny mote of discordia. A single packet of information return, one of a trillion received every second by the sensoria of Mars. It is out of step with all the others. It is not temporally synchronised with the rest, by a factor of one millionth of a second, even allowing for relative position. Its *time* is wrong. Kelbor-Hal presumes this to be a micro-discrepancy in imaging or auspex mesh, a tiny imperfection in the Mars arrays. Active, he tests this assumption, running diagnostic examinations of the Mechanicum systems to locate machine fault, technical malfunction, data-decay and storage/evaluation flaw. Concurrently, he instructs a full re-scan as a comparative.

It is mildly diverting. Faults occur in every system, no matter how immaculate, due to the holy laws of entropy. They are always a pleasure to correct, for the correction of a micro-error is the path to perfection. It is the first error he has detected in four months. It is something to do besides wait.

The diagnostics report no fault. The re-scan returns the same error. Alertly active now, the Fabricator General repeats the diagnostics and the re-scan. The diagnostics report no fault. The re-scan now returns two micro-errors. Two motes of discordia. Two temporal anomalies.

Kelbor-Hal diverts all primary magi to address the issue. By the time –

four nanoseconds – they are in work, the error return is four. Then sixteen. Then two hundred and fifty-six.

He is watching a cascade failure. An expanding zone of temporal collapse. The epicentre is Terra, but the error-wave is accelerating outwards across the Solar Realm.

Time is broken. The four-dimensional structure of realspace is unravelling, dismantled by the exoplanar forces bulging through the rift-wound that the Warmaster has inflicted on Terra.

Time is broken. Kelbor-Hal pauses, and reframes his definition, realising that it is woefully imprecise. Time isn't broken. Time has ceased. It has stopped. It has frozen, suspended.

The constant low hum of Mars changes again. Cautionary sirens start to wail in the depths of the forge. Kelbor-Hal composes a priority signal to the Warmaster, and sends it on repeat. He watches as the wave of un-time, rolling out from Terra, begins to break across the Martian Zone. He watches as the harmonised chronometers of the forge suspend, or zero out.

He watches as the clocks stop.

He watches as the measureless data in the caverns of his domain begins to re-form and rewrite, recomposing into new units of information, each one identical, each one the same word, each one the same binharic expression of a name.

It is the name of the Omnissiah. The new Omnissiah. The *true* Omnissiah.

Kelbor-Hal begins to scream, which is quite unlike him.

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iii

The last hand

In the imposed silence, they play games, not as diversion, but to maintain some modicum of mental performance. Niora Su-Kassen had, for the first two months, chosen regicide as her habit, playing against the bridge crew and, when the opportunity arose, against Captain Halbract and the other Huscarl seniors of the Praetorian contingent. Playing regicide against an Imperial Fist was an exercise in futility, until Su-Kassen recognised the substrate of ground war strategies they imposed on the board. Innovating, purely to keep her mind curious, she introduced some battlefleet tactics to her game, principally theories of swarm assault and elective sacrifice, and so defeated Halbract twice, and forced a stalemate three times. She knew she would savour the expression on his face for the rest of her life. A hint of wounded pride, but also a fascination that bordered on hunger. The next time they played, Halbract had analysed his losses, ascertained her tactical ploys, and adjusted accordingly. He resumed his winning streak. He had learned from defeat, and revised his strategies. She never won again.

That is not the reason she has stopped playing regicide, though. After two months, a game predicated on the concept of killing a king seems

distasteful.

She makes the ship her habit instead.

The ship. The *Phalanx*, the largest and greatest fortress-vessel in human history. She prowls its walkways and galleries, its fighting decks and drive compartments, hour after hour, inspecting it minutely, and sometimes undertaking her own adjustments and maintenance. She speaks, in whispers, to every crewperson she encounters, from duty officers down to the lowliest munition serfs and stokers. She learns names. She hears fragments of life stories. She observes their habits and the games they play to stay alert. Regicide, Nine-gambit and Senet in the officers' refectory; Ashtapada in cartography; Gow, and Hounds and Wolves, in the war room; games of dice and wager in the billet decks; hands of Tarock on the fuse canisters of the autoloaders; rounds of Song and Cartomance in the dining halls, fast-shuffled turns of Thrice-My-Trick in the boiler sumps.

Boredom is the immediate foe. Boredom, and a commensurate slackening of morale and readiness. The *Phalanx*, for all its might, is cowering in the radiation shadow of Saturn's rings, veiled by the gas giant's magnetic fields. Along with it, just as silent, lurk hundreds of loyalist warships, the survivors of the Solar War, the scrap remnants of the Legion fleets, the Saturnine Flotilla, the magnificent Jovian Fleet. All are running dark, systems on minimal, in a state of hibernation as close to full shutdown as possible.

It is an armada, and with it she could conquer worlds. But against the traitor fleet, it is nothing more than a few wounded strays hiding in a gutter. The Warmaster's ships, a swarm of battle groups, own total dominance of the Solar Realm. To move is to be detected, to be detected is to be annihilated, either in line engagement with the traitor host, where the term 'numerical superiority' feels like an ironic understatement, or picked off like a sickly herd by the rapacious predator formations that stalk the inner and outer spheres.

Su-Kassen sometimes considers annihilation. It has a certain appeal. As an admiral of the Jovian Fleets, as Grand Terran Admiral (Acting), she is a career warrior constructed for war as surely as the *Phalanx* itself. Fighting, even to the death, seems preferable to waiting in what feels too often like a coward's silence. She dreams of onslaught. She computes strategies and gambits. Every one of them ends in defeat and obliteration at the hands of

the traitor mass, with an inevitability that matches Halbract's mastery of regicide. But victory is not her objective. Killing is. She imagines scenarios of a cold start, a mass acceleration, slingshotting her bruised armada into the Terran Sphere. A target-rich environment. There would be no coming back but, Throne above, they would die well. They would claim a price. The *Phalanx* alone would gut a dozen grand cruisers before it died. They would punish and wound the traitor fleet, shred its flank, and burn all that they could before their time ran out.

It would be glorious. It would be better than endless silence. It would be something.

But she keeps the idea to herself. Halbract and the seniors would deny it the moment she suggested it. They would probably have her removed from command. The *Phalanx* formation is reserved for one, unequivocal purpose: to wait until summoned and, once summoned, to execute a lightning extraction to remove the Emperor from Terra.

They are the last card to play, the last hand, an acknowledgement of ultimate defeat. They are the last trick, the mechanism of resignation. Their move is the final move, a declaration that the loyalists concede.

Without them, the Emperor, in final defeat, will simply die.

The Praetorian Huscarls and the Custodians will not permit that eventuality. They are dedicated to the Emperor's life. Though Terra might fall, unthinkable in itself, He must live.

She bides her time, waiting for her final duty. Time is slow, as though the clocks have stopped. She doubts the Emperor will ever allow Halbract's endgame. History has demonstrated His determination. He will never leave the Throne, or allow Himself to be removed to safety. She is entirely sure that, in this, He is like her. Fight to the last. No quarter. No concession. To the death.

But Dorn's order was precise. She, and her armada, and her thousands of personnel, wait to execute a command that will never be completed.

She puts down the grip-wrench she's holding. In frustration, she had clenched it so tightly her thin fingers are blanched white. She wants to scream to rid her body of tension, but anything beyond a whisper is prohibited. Enemy sensoria are listening, even for the slightest vibration or hull-echo that might give away position. She imagines ways to convince Halbract, but there was no chance of that to begin with, and the odds are

even lower since Corswain's run. The Dark Angel and his host of ten thousand, a beacon of hope for a second, until it became clear it was *only* ten thousand, had elected to make a suicidal sprint for Terra in an effort to secure and relight the Astronomican. It had taken every iota of her diplomacy to convince Halbract to allow it, and more besides to get him to commit the Emperor's flagship, the immense *Imperator Somnium*. That ship, the fastest and most advanced in her armada, had been the only vessel capable of achieving the run, and the action had necessitated its sacrifice. Corswain had argued that without the light of the Astronomican, no relief fleets could ever find their way to Terra.

That had been many days ago. Years, so it feels to her. They had watched, from the bridge, the glorious dash. The fire-flashes dotting Terra's orbital zone. The bright flares that winked out. The *Somnium* had gone, obliterated in the line-breaking charge, and Corswain's warships too, racing in its wake.

No word had come of the drop's success. No confirmation that anything or anyone had reached the surface alive.

The Astronomican had not relit.

Halbract had passed no comment, but she knows the entire affair has simply reinforced his resolve.

She walks the silent spaces between Aft Ventral Circulation and Aft 987 Fitting. She walks the endless lines of waiting Xiphon interceptors in the hangar bays. She wonders if the Astartes' practice cages meet the silence order threshold. She longs to damage something with a sword.

A rating salutes her. A moment for recollection. *Tanstayer. Modit Tanstayer, drive assembly second class*. She greets him with a whisper, and asks after his stomach, because last time she spoke to him the relentless diet of slab rations had stricken him with the gripes. He is better now, thank you for asking, admiral. She enquires about his winning streak at Tarock, for Tanstayer has more luck with cards than digestion. He says he is a victim of his own success, and the deck crew refuse to wager with him, because he wins too often.

'Besides,' he whispers, 'they are all more entertained by watching Montak.'

Su-Kassen asks to see.

Montak – *Guillaume Montak, the assembly chief* – is seated in the fitting

shops. He is hunched over a tool chest, setting out dog-eared tarot cards on its lid. It is an elderly deck, apparently of the standard Imperial composition, the major and minor arcanas. A ring of watching crew members parts, respectfully, to let her observe.

Montak is an old, whiskered veteran, his gnarled hands stained almost blue from chemical exposure. There are general regulations regarding casual divination, but Su-Kassen is well aware of the deep veins of superstition and tradition that lace the ancient orders of the battlefleet. Voyagers and mariners have always cherished their luck and their portents. She will pass no judgement. She has a deck of her own. Montak seems alert to this too. He greets her arrival without concern, just a simple knowing nod and smile, and continues his spread.

The Leonormal Spread. An old form, unconventional. The reactive wafers glow in the half-light of the fitting shop. Montak turns the cards face up in the precise sequence of reading, each turn a little flourish, a little twitch of the wrist that makes each card snap.

She watches the read. *The Harlequin* of discordia, *The Eye*, *The Great Hoste*, *The Shatter'd World*, *The Labyrinthine Path*, *The Throne* reversed, *The Hulk*, *The Moon*, *The Martyr*, *The Monster*, *The Lightning Tower*, and *The Emperor.* He turns the last. *The Dark King.*

An odious reading. There is a murmur from those watching. She presumes it is because they, like her, recognise an ill-starred spread. But Montak is grinning. Wagers are changing hands.

Su-Kassen frowns. To her, and she is not without private experience, the spread is poor, and the interpretation painfully bleak. A shift towards discord and the most fell aspects of fortune. A world embattled and lost, a throne overturned… She knows one should not lean towards the literal in any interpretive reading, but *The Eye*, representing the Ocularis Malifica that marks the doom of the xenos aeldari, cannot help but remind her of the roiling, nephelospheric nimbus of immaterial collapse that the bridge displays show suffusing the Throneworld.

'I don't understand,' she whispers to Tanstayer. 'Why the amuse-ment?'

'Because of the way the cards turned,' he whispers back.

'But they turned upon a disagreeable spread.'

'Yes,' he agrees. 'Again.'

Montak looks up at her and winks. 'Care to wager, admiral?' he says. He

gently shuffles the deck.

‘On what?’ Su-Kassen asks.

‘At first, it was the composition,’ says Tanstayer. ‘A coin for every card predicted. But, since yesterday…’

‘Since yesterday?’ Su-Kassen asks.

‘Since yesterday,’ says Montak, ‘it is merely bet on yes or bet on no. Will it come the same, or different?’

‘The permutations are considerable,’ says Su-Kassen. ‘It isn’t a coin toss.’

‘You’d think,’ chuckles Montak.

‘It’s come the same wise every time,’ says Tanstayer. ‘Every time, the same spread.’

‘How many times?’ she asks.

‘Fifty?’ Montak guesses. ‘Thereabouts. In a row.’

She blinks.

‘Chief, I know you as a good man and an old rogue,’ she says. ‘The rogue, I suspect, is now at work. You are fleecing these men with sleight of hand.’

‘Not so, my lady,’ he says. He offers the deck to her. ‘You may sort and shuffle, if you like. Be my guest. If the soul receiving the reading shuffles, it–’

‘Transfers energy to the deck,’ she says. ‘I know the way of it.’

She takes the deck. The edges of the cards are stained blue. She shuffles, deftly, four times, then cuts, then riffles twice more.

‘Oh,’ says Montak. ‘Lads, we have a card-savvy sharper in our midst.’

The men snigger. Su-Kassen hands the deck back.

Montak licks the pad of his thumb. He lays the spread again.

The Harlequin, The Eye, The Great Hoste, The Shatter’d World, The Labyrinthine Path, The Throne, The Hulk, The Moon, The Martyr, The Monster, The Lightning Tower, and *The Emperor.* Last, *The Dark King.*

She stares at the spread.

‘Chief,’ she says. ‘I need you to burn these cards.’

Montak looks at her questioningly. Before she can say more, a light on her data-bracelet starts to flash. Intercoms and hails have been muted, but the bead of light means she is needed on the bridge.

‘I’m called away,’ she says. ‘Burn these cards immediately. That’s an order…’

Halbract is waiting for her. The tiered bridge chamber is as vast and silent as a mausoleum.

‘Lord Halbract?’ she whispers as she enters.

The Huscarl draws her aside. His sharp face is set hard.

‘Admiral,’ he says, his voice hushed. ‘The clocks have stopped.’

‘A malfunction? Which clocks?’

‘No, admiral,’ he says. ‘All clocks. Every chron aboard. Every timepiece aboard the *Phalanx*. Even relativistic trackers. They have stopped, all frozen at the same moment.’

‘We…’ she begins. ‘What?’

She breathes hard.

‘Has an explanation been offered, Halbract?’ she asks, as composed as she is able to be.

‘Analysis suggests that immaterial activity in the Sol System has…’ Now *he* hesitates. ‘Has somehow afflicted the natural operation of realspace. Time has stopped.’

‘Stopped?’

‘A still point, without backward or forward motion. A hiatus. A cessation.’

‘Over what area?’

‘We are still determining, admiral. Perhaps the entire Solar Realm. Perhaps beyond that.’

She nods, as though it is nothing. She doesn’t want the bridge crew seeing the fear brewing inside her. She does not want to appear weak to Halbract.

‘Find out, please,’ she says. ‘As quickly as we can. I authorise use of passive sensoria, but only within the bounds of detection avoidance.’

Halbract nods.

She walks to her chamber adjoining the bridge. Its gloomy familiarity and lack of scale offers some reassurance, but not enough. She unlocks the brass tantalus and pours a regulation measure of amasec. She swallows it in one hit.

She sips the second.

She thinks of Montak. Her own deck of psychoreactive wafers is in her desk drawer. She considers, for a second, taking them out, and shuffling and dealing for herself to expose his roguish palming and tricks of forcing.

But she has an awful feeling that she knows how the spread will read.

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PART FIVE

STEADFAST AS THOU ART

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5:i

Fragments

The dead now outnumber the living, but both the living and the dead are outnumbered by the deathless and the never-alive-at-all.

Corpses are piled five or six deep along the foot of the Delphic Battlement. They died where they fell, driven back against the mighty wall, cut down as they made their last defence with no room left to retreat. They lie, limbs entangled, draped across each other, in the mire. They are not men. They are Titan war engines.

The few of their kind still standing, the last of the loyalist engines, back slowly through the firestorms of the Palatine, one wretched step after another, discharging their weapons ceaselessly into the onrushing traitor mass. Their power and munitions are almost spent. One by one, they will be taken and toppled: split by armour fire, or felled by Neverborn wrath. Some will detonate like star-deaths, annihilating acres of ground with them. Some will simply stop, power exhausted and reactors choked out, to be overwhelmed from the ground up by traitors, who will scale them like teeming ants until they are shrouded head to foot in moving skins of tiny

armoured bodies. Each death will be an epic feat of courage. Each death will be just another engine-kill to be notched on a corroded pauldron or the iron skirts of a daemon-tank. Each death will go unwitnessed.

Warfare moves as one thing, a shifting mosaic of a billion individual pieces. It flows like a flood of tar, sparking with uncountable flashes. A great carpet of fighting human figures has been rolled out across the uneven terrain, up slopes, across ridges, down valleys and over hills. It covers everything, and it is in constant, writhing motion. Numberless weapons, hacking and bludgeoning, numberless shots burning in the air, numberless claws, numberless teeth. Plough-nosed war machines, grinding on treads, score through the fields of warriors, casting bodies into the air behind them like husks from bulk harvesters. The air is dull amber, burned by the glare of the staggering detonations that burst and spray against the pitted walls of the Delphic. The wall-armour plates of ceramite and plasteel flake and bruise, pushed past the limits of their material properties by the relentless fury of assault. Adamantine wall plating, superheated by unholy flame, begins to dribble and ooze, coursing quicksilver tears down the towering battlements.

Only the locked and final fortress of the Sanctum Imperialis remains. The Palace Dominions, once a celestial city-state that covered the area of a nation, are reduced to its last redoubt, a lone enclave of defiance, girded by the last wall of the Delphic Battlement and the straining casemate of its void shields. Magnificans is long gone, a cremated wilderness of firestorms and rubble. Anterior is no more, a swamp of churned mud and flame-lapped ruins through which the ever-multiplying traitor forces still pour to swell the howling host encircling the Sanctum. Even the outer belts of the Sanctum are lost: the great encircling defence of the Ultimate Wall has been torn down, and each majestic section of its circuit – Europa, Saturnine, Adamant, Western Hemispheric, Indomitor, Exultant – cast over and splintered, along with their bastions, and the names they wore as emblems of resistance. Inside the broken crown of the Ultimate Wall, the Palatine and its inner ring of city-forts burns in hell. Lakes of flame boil around mountains of dead. Ruins fume with frost-fire. Seas of liquid mud stretch uninterrupted for kilometres, like a desolate, endless beach where the tide of war has rolled out, the silt flats and mud bars swirled with coloured bands

of chemicals, oils and liquified organics, and dotted with the half-submerged islets of war machines, of dead engines, of fractured bastions, of unidentifiable wreckage, of hills and mounds where lost men made their last stands. Loyal forces, whole armies and divisions in some cases, still live and fight in the deathscape of the Palatine Ring, but they are alone, asphyxiated by smoke, unable to advance or retreat, cut off, and already counted as extinct by the despairing war court in Hegemon Control.

So great is the final cataclysm, in this last un-hour of the day of days, that even Terra itself begins to submit. The earth convulses and splits, wrenching open abyssal canyons and fire-breathing gulfs that swallow loyalist and traitor ranks alike, or gargantuan sinkholes that belch volcanic rage.

Only the final fortress remains.

If that. The four divine atrocities of Chaos urge their followers forward, into ever greater throes of feverish devotion. The toppling is now so close, the victory a palpable taste in the air, despite the gagging soot and smoke. In a time of un-time, the victory is already occurring and has occurred.

Those of the Khornate creed seethe forward, the blood drumming inside them so intensely that their vessels and flesh may burst from the pressure. The red partakes of every crime, swollen with a fury that has become a new force of nature. Mercy, pity and hope are obsolete concepts. The Blood God’s Neverborn heralds trample such meaningless notions into the morass. They are giant things, larger than the largest Titan engine, their skyscraping antlers glowing neon orange against the thick blackness of the sky.

Those plighted to She Who Thirsts delight in the rapture of collapse. They claw and beat and lick at the last wall, crooning their demented lullabies and unhinged love songs. They thrill with obsessive need and intolerable desire. They are betrothed to ruin, and this is their annunciation. They lust for the coming feast.

The bloated vermin infected by the Grandfather Lord of Decay scurry and teem through the wreckage, befouled and befouling all, riddled with lice, drooling infected phlegm, boring their mephitic contagion into skin and bone and mind.

The hierophants of Change and their legions of converts ripple, unstable

and in flux, and sing nine-beat hymns to the great rites of transformation: life into death, earth into fire, materia into immateria. Unstable in their thoughts and their atoms alike, they roil like sputtering fire through the torque and mutation of reality. They laugh at the final wall, for it is nothing. There is no outside or inside any more.

Every pathway is inevitable.

He is in the bowels of the great ship that was once his home. He knows the way, for his life here was part-spent learning its secrets.

Loken grips his chainsword, the other blades sheathed across his back. He is following the bilges of the vessel, the lowest, darkest zones, alert for any trick or murmur of the foe.

Fluid trickles down the walls from the rusted ceiling. The vast service tunnel is knee-deep in frothy liquid. Infrequent service lamps bounce multiple reflections off the surface as he wades through it, sending ripples out in wide circles. The liquid is bright red.

The last time he was here, this colour was due to rust. Corrosion from higher levels would seep down and stain the bilge-water with its oxides. He can smell it isn't that any more. It's blood. Vast quantities of blood, leaking through the ship from unimaginable carnage many decks above. It's swimming down the ironwork walls, and dripping from the bulkhead spans, collecting and pooling, as though the *Vengeful Spirit* has suffered some vast haematoma. He wonders if the lividity is visible on the skin of the hull outside.

He wades on.

The structure and configuration of the great ship has warped, and is still warping. Loken considers each junction he comes to, each hatch, each access. Which way now? Which way will lead him to his father?

And when he finds him in this bloody ruin, what will be left of him?

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5:ii

On becoming more than man

No one tells you what it will feel like when you become a god.

No one warns you how strange it will seem. Understandable. How many souls have ever done it, so that they can recount the experience? You were raised to believe that figure was zero, because you were raised to believe there *were* no gods.

Another of your father's infinite lies.

No, let's be fair to Him. That's what *He* believed. He spent millennia believing He was a lonely king in a godless universe. His realm was empty. It was void and without form. There were no higher powers behind the sky, no omniscient beings dwelling beyond the architecture of the star fields. He was alone, the only being of significant potency in an otherwise mechanical cosmology.

He was powerful, the most powerful thing in existence, but He was no god, and He knew it. And He knew there were no gods to be found anywhere. There was no fate, no destiny, no purpose, no structure, no plan. The universe was merely a state of materia that had, once upon a time, begun, and which would one day end, and between those two points there

was no meaning or sense.

So He made sense for Himself. There was no one else to do the job. A self-appointed demiurge, He took on the aspect of a god and engineered a fate, and a destiny, and, most certainly, a plan. He imposed a meaning. He must have presumed, along the way, that such a feat would make Him a god, by default, or turn Him into one.

It didn't.

You believe He probably thought it had, though. You can see that now. All those years of insisting He was 'just a man', all those edicts denying His divinity. That's just what a man, who thought He was a god, would believe that a god would do. What is that phrase again? Mersadie will know it. 'Methinks He doth protest too much.'

Too much indeed. The affected, self-effacing modesty of the truly arrogant. He thought humility and denial would make people more eager to believe in His divine nature.

Kneel at His throne.

Quake at His gaze.

Take His Word for everything.

Your father has no idea what it's really like. How could He? You didn't either, until… until *this*. You're not sure what you are. Perhaps you're a god now, perhaps not. You're certainly not *just a man* any more. You have woken from a state of confusion to find yourself changed. Unearthly power fills you to the brim. If you're not a god, then you are well on the way to becoming one. Perhaps this is the state of transition, slow and strange, as you transform from a man into something more? It is not how you imagined it, or how anyone could imagine it. It is beyond mortal knowing. There is simply before, and there is afterwards. Before, you were Horus Lupercal, beloved and triumphant. And now you are this.

It is not entirely pleasant or comfortable. When time permits, you will sit down with the remembrancer and tell her all about it. It is rare knowledge, unique. It is worth recording, the state-change where mortal embodiment starts to fade and ascension begins. Whether you are a god already, or simply in the process of becoming one, you can no longer quite define your edges and limits, the span of your physicality, or the breadth of your senses. It almost makes you want to weep, because you are no longer what you were, and you can never go back.

It’s hard to even remember what you were like before this happened. You are glad Mamzel Mersadie wrote it all down. You can go and read your own history and be reminded of the man you used to be.

She is not here. You’ll send Maloghurst to find her. But he is not here either. The fitters and the attentive squads of senior officers have gone. Even the vast host of Word Bearers, who assembled to sing your name, have departed. You think, perhaps, they all fled in terror at the sight of you when you started to transfigure into this higher form.

No one’s here, apart from you and the things that whisper your name. The Lupercal Court is dark. The light hurts your eyes. You see better in the void. The darkness soothes your mind. This is a period of adjustment. You must be allowed time to come to terms with what is happening to you. How long must that be?

You realise *that’s* up to you. The thought makes you chuckle. You answer to no one. You need no one’s permission for *anything*. If you want time to adjust, then so be it. You grant it to yourself.

There’s so *much* to get used to. You dreamed of power, and now you have it. It’s disconcerting.

You wonder where everyone is. Then – *again*, the disconcertion! – you realise you know, because you know *everything*. There’s no one here because you sent them away. You gave the command, and now your faithful followers, your sons and warriors, are spread out across the ship to execute the trap you meticulously devised.

Because the false ones have arrived, enticed by the bait you set. Unable to resist, your enemies have boarded the flagship, and entered the realm of the *Vengeful Spirit* on a final and desperate mission to vanquish you and win this war.

They will fail, of course. You’ve already decided that too. Your trap is inescapable, and your victory certain. Their efforts, which to them seem so brave, are merely the last spasms and twitches of an animal in its death throes. They are the prey, and you, you are the wolf, your jaws clamped around their throats, waiting patiently for the last shudders of life to cease.

In the distance, very faintly, you can hear the sounds of violence echoing through the ship. Your enemies are beginning to die, one by one.

But they don’t have to. Death is not the only option. They can make a choice. You have, in your benevolent grace, prepared gifts for each of them;

each gift fashioned by one of the four powers of your ascendancy. The gifts are temptations, invitations, offerings. You will not be a cruel god. If they accept your gifts, they can join with you and become one with you.

If they spurn your gifts, well then… vengeance is yours.

Everything is ready. Your guests approach. The false ones, the false four. Not the *Old* Four, who are sublimely blended into the vessel of your soul, but the four *new* fools who have demanded to meet you face to face. Constantin. Your siblings, Rogal and Sanguinius. Your father.

Here they come…

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5:iii

Invincible

The pressure gates blow in an intense cloud of flame, and the Angel and his vanguard fly through the breach.

Ikasati would have paused for a second, but Sanguinius is airborne before the immense fireball stops roiling or the pelt of scrap plasteel stops raining down, so he and the Guard loft with their primarch, wings extended. They fly like a salvo of rockets, bucking the gulp of overpressure, through the swirling blaze, with blackened lumps of debris stinging off their glorious plate. Triumph is close. Extraordinarily close. Taerwelt Ikasati has never seen his lord so furious or so eager. There is a reckless abandon in him, a terrible hunger that suggests his lord feels immortal on this day of days.

And so he is. So are they all, whether they live or die. The blood-bright Angels of Baal, the magnificent IX Legion, have surpassed themselves. Despite the odds, and lacking the support of three-quarters of their intended force, they have, in Terra's darkest hour, excelled. Alive or dead, their names will be remembered. The first to reach the traitor's throat. The first to penetrate his lair. The first to mete out justice and vengeance on those who have broken all covenants and trusts, all bonds of blood and fealty,

who have torn the works of man asunder, and threatened the very existence of the Imperium.

Beyond the ruptured wreckage of the gates, the traitor host awaits, drawn up in ranks two hundred deep. The forward files have already crumbled, felled and mutilated by the blast. The rest, cased in ugly plate and as menacing as murder, recoil in dread when they see what is coming at them through the flames.

Sanguinius, wings wide, howling his brother's name, merciless.

What sight in all creation could be more devastating?

The smoke-stained air of the Great Atrium lights up as the traitor multitude opens fire. A thousand points and flecks of light, from bolters and las-weapons, from voltaics and Adrathics. A hail of fire.

Heedless, Sanguinius soars through it, and ploughs into the front lines. His impact is a hammer-blow that sends a ripple through the entire regimented mass. Bodies, veteran and powerful Sons of Horus, spin into the air and smash to the deck in his wake. Many are not whole. He drives into their fracturing formation, sword scything, spear plunging. He strides, like a man wading into an ocean swell, leaving a furrow of the dead and the dismembered behind him. The sea-spray is jetting blood, the cresting wave a cloud of splinters, the spume a haze of gore. He does not stop. The enemy mass, three full companies at least, perhaps more, winces as he cuts into it, like a body flinching as a sword runs through it.

In a second, other swords are raking wounds of their own: Raldoron, Sacre, Meshol, Ikasati and the tempests of the Sanguinary Guard on their hissing augmetic wings, each shearing into the lines, each reaping his own devastating furrow through the ranks of the foe, turning bodies at their heels as a plough turns soil. Behind them, slower but no less dreadful, come the storming phalanxes of Furio's Cataphractii, the cohorts of Maheldaron's tactical squads, and Krystapheros' assault brigade, the tempered weight of the Anabasis company.

They are the lance, driving into the traitors' heart to deliver the killing stroke, and Sanguinius is the tip of the spear.

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5:iv

Pandaemonium

They are now thirty-seven seconds into the fight. The perfect biological instrument of Constantin Valdor's mind is keeping time even though their chron systems have failed and the sensoria arrays in their golden armour have overloaded. He has learned nine hundred and three new names, and the attendant secrets that accompany them. Unrelenting havoc boils around them, and a darkness as heavy as pack-ice vices them. There is no way out of the pit. They have spent three days fighting their way along a deep ravine of cartilage and bone only to find the end blocked by a sheer cliff. Three days' effort wasted. Three days. But they are only thirty-seven seconds into the fight.

There is no time to contemplate their situation. Constantin's mental performance, his engineered ability to multi-task, evaluate and process, is superlative. So are the minds of all his Custodians. They exceed the abilities of mere Astartes, and probably all primarchs too. Even in the most intense battle, they can maintain peak killing precision and combat response, and still have a reserve left for strategic reckoning.

But not in this. The more Constantin tries to evaluate some kind of

overview, the more furiously the assaults come. This pit, the *Vengeful Spirit*, is matching the speed of his thoughts with the intensity of its attacks. It is not permitting him time to do anything more than compose reactive strikes. It is trying to overwhelm him physically and mentally with its unstinting aggression. If his mind slips, his body will fail; if his body falters, his mind will be lost. He doesn't even have time to recognise this.

Thirty-eight seconds into the fight.

Constantin wanted this confrontation. He yearned for it. He knew it would be demanding. He knew it would be the single most important fight of his service, and thus likely to be the most arduous too. He *wanted* it to be demanding. Such a feat deserved to be the most stupendous challenge; the hardest, the most gruelling, the most costly, the most brutal, the worst. Constantin thought he was ready for it. He had been bred for it, crafted one atom at a time to be fit for it, indoctrinated to be eager for it, and a lifetime of service and victory in arms had shown him the very worst things combat could be.

But this…

Now he is in it, thirty-eight seconds into it, he accepts that he had no idea what the worst could mean. This exceeds even his grimmest imaginings. This multiplies the fury of his most savage past encounters not just by a factor or ten or a hundred, but into some entirely *other* range of magnitude, so beyond the limits of his experience that it doesn't even seem to be a fight any more. The very words – fight, battle, assault – are inadequate. It is a state of constant frenzy in which his body cannot stop moving, his reactions cannot slow, his nerves cannot slacken, and his mind cannot think.

It is thirty-nine seconds into the fight.

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5:v

Come in under the shadow

In the red desert, in the crimson shadow under the red wall, he rises to his feet. There is no way out of the endless place. He knows this, because in the course of a century, he has walked the length of every wall, and trekked the crest of every dune, surveying every inch of the boundless waste.

There is no way out, except to say it. It wants him to say it.

But he won't. He won't give in. Even though he feels like it's what he has always, really, *really* wanted to do.

He is not sure of anything any more. There are no facts, no data, nothing available he can order. He is only sure of one thing.

'I am,' he says.

He has nearly rusted away. The breeze and sun have bleached the identifier markings from his wargear. He isn't completely sure of his own name.

But mettle lasts where metal rusts.

He won't give in.

A century has passed. A century at least. Maybe two. Maybe three. It's hard to know, because he can't count the days any more than he can count the bodies along the wall, because the bodies have all rusted away to

nothing, and there is no day or night. Whatever he needed to get back to, whatever he has missed, it will have ended long ago.

But he will get back.

He raises his sword. It's just a ragged nub.

He starts to scratch at the walls again.

Along the walls, in the cool shadow, for kilometres on end, the red stone is marked with the things he has scratched. He has been doing it for years. Plans, marked on walls. Schemes. Configurations of possibilities. Designs for escape. Designs for the future. Hundreds of them. Thousands of them. Each one, carefully made, has proven unworkable or impossible. So he has abandoned each one in turn, and begun another. This scheme. That scheme. This plan. That design.

'I am,' he says, reminding himself.

With what's left of his sword, he rakes another plan on the wall. Everything is blood red. He scrapes and cuts, shaping his next scheme in the dirt, scraping and cutting.

He scratches men. They have weapons. He inscribes walls, for walls, like plans, have always been useful to him. He scores lines of approach and retreat, lines of axis and engagement. It is not art, or decoration. It isn't a memorial of a battle he once conducted. It isn't a record of something that *has been*. He is carving out tomorrow. It is a statement of intention, of what *will be*. He is making a plan, so he can execute it. He is imposing his will.

The red desert doesn't like it. It wants him to stop. It keeps telling him to stop, in whispers carried by the breeze. *Just give up. Just give in. Just say it*.

He won't.

'I won't,' he says.

He is defiant. He is unyielding.

This, he thinks as he works, this *will be*. One of these plans, one of these permutations. *One* of them will work. I will break out and run, like so. I will be somewhere else. There will be other people there, waiting for me. These are the weapons they will be carrying. This – as his fingers move from scratched line to scratched line – this will be the path I will follow to escape. This is where it will end, this cross here. This will be my target.

What is set out here on the wall in crude gouges and ragged scrapes will happen in life tomorrow. Or the next day. Or the century after. But it will happen. I will evade and get away, for here, see? I am already free.

I am modelling the future.

To sanctify this, to commit to this configuration of tomorrow, he scoops his callused, filthy hand into the red dust at his feet. He cups a handful of blood-red dust. In it are tiny yellow flecks of plasteel. He presses it, palm flat, against the wall. He leaves his mark, the mark of himself, on his plan. This is what will happen, and with my hand I signify it. It cannot be undone.

I am already free.

‘I am Rogal Dorn,’ he says, reasonably certain. ‘My name is Rogal Dorn.’

It doesn’t like it. The red desert, the red wall, the red everything, it doesn’t like it. It whispers on the breeze.

Say it, say it, say it. Who is the blood for? Say it. Give in. Just say it. Give in to your longing. Say it.

He has decided not to.

It tries to persuade him. It coaxes. It pleads. It demands. Some years, it uses other voices, close to or far away. The voices it uses sometimes sound like voices he once knew. But he can’t name them. He can’t confidently name himself.

‘I am Rogal Dorn,’ he says, just in case he’s right.

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Dorn wanders the endless desert.

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5:vi

What have you become?

Caecaltus Dusk no longer has to think. The most precarious and important combat of his life, and he no longer has to focus or concentrate.

The will of my master, the Emperor, moves through me.

It is liberating. It is strange. The proconsul has always been his master's instrument. He was constructed to be precisely that. But his duty as an instrument has always been performed through fierce discipline, dedication and intense focus. The Emperor's will has bidden him and commanded him, but only rarely has it invested him and co-opted his form directly.

It invests me now. It is absolute.

He is moving faster, striking harder, and fighting more ferociously than ever before in his life, but none of it is a conscious choice. Caecaltus is a passenger in his own body.

They all are, the last of the Hetaeron.

All of us, encircling our glorious lord as He makes His advance, are just extensions of His being.

The Emperor, one towering figure in blazing gold, surrounded by seven giants, has become one mind in eight bodies.

Some might say that makes Caecaltus a puppet.

Some might say, those curs with the temerity to question the Emperor's actions and methods, might see it as definitive proof of a ruinously inflamed ego, of an insane need to control everything, of an authoritarian singularity that disregards the interests of other living things. Some might see it as evidence that we Custodes are less than human, that for all our vaunted prowess, we are mere drones, lacking the vitality, self-identity and personality of the oh-so-human Astartes.

But it is not so. Caecaltus is no puppet. It feels, far more, as though Caecaltus is a favourite weapon, a master-crafted sword, a prized blade, and he is simply being wielded. There is joy in it, as though this is the way it was always supposed to be. To feel the Emperor's will operating through him is the ultimate expression of his purpose.

A sword does not question the way it is used. A sword does not question anything. It simply exists to be a sword, and it can only become itself in the hand of its wielder.

It is oddly tranquil. Caecaltus has never felt such intrinsic unity with his master.

I feel myself moving, at speeds I did not know I was capable of. I sense my reflexes and reactions elevated to an inconceivable degree. I see the paragon spear in my hands as it spins and jabs, delivering one faultless execution after another. I see the dark horrors all around us split and burst, tear open and de-manifest.

He sees his brethren at his side, the last of the Hetaeron company. Xadophus and Karedo, Taurid and Ravengast, Nmembo and Zagrus, all of them proven exemplars of Legio Custodes excellence. Caecaltus thought he had seen martial perfection, but never before has he witnessed any of them fight with such flawless grace or fidelity. They are all channelling His will, seven weapons wielded by His extended mind in supreme synchronicity, subduing and destroying anything in this corpse-hulk flagship that attempts to block their advance.

He sees his master.

Or, rather, he does not. Caecaltus cannot. With every step they take, the Master of Mankind steadily increases in radiance. His aura has always been present, a part of Him, sometimes soft like moonlight, sometimes sharp as daybreak. But it has never been as incandescent as this. It is almost too

bright to behold directly, an alabaster glare that radiates from His immense figure, rendering Him as nothing except a human shape made of blinding white light.

In my whole lifetime, I have never known my king manifest a level of power even approaching *this*.

But it's hardly surprising. There has never been a need before. There has never been a moment like this. The unprecedented demonstration of power, the absolute investment of His companions as extensions of His self… Without it, they would all be dead.

For the power of the enemy defies description.

Nightmares assault them from every angle. The warp enfolds them, naked and raw, wild and screaming. Horus, somehow, is orchestrating this maelstrom. Caecaltus can only conclude that Horus Lupercal, once so noble and admired, has become something quite other. Not a daemon prince like some of his cursed brothers, but more, far more. He was always so strong-willed, it is hardly surprising that his doom-form should be strong too. Not man, not transhuman, not even possessed soul, but some transcendent conduit of energy.

Caecaltus doubts Horus even knows it. He doubts 'Horus' even exists any more.

Oh, Horus Lupercal. You poor, deluded child. What have you let into yourself? What have you allowed to spill free? What have you become that you can unleash this hellstorm upon us?

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5:vii

Fragments

Fire and fury rage at the Delphic Wall. The final wall of the final fortress will not keep them out.

Fire howls and fury roars. They scream and shriek in unison. In frenzied partnership, they encircle the Sanctum Imperialis and throttle it, squeezing their psychopathic fingers tighter. Fire blisters the citadel's armoured skin, and melts its steel. Fury claws at its stone, abrading it, and opening fissures. Together, they gnaw away the last proud circuit of wall, and the last void shields, and the last battlements and casemates. Relentlessly, piece-by-piece, fragment-by-fragment, they grind the Delphic down.

Nothing stands forever. Even the mighty Delphic must eventually succumb and break open, like the hard shell of some delicacy, or the dome of a skull. Then the fire and the fury will dig inside, scoop out the soft meat within, and feed. Their hunger will not be denied.

Nothing stands forever.

To be a defender on the last wall is to be a soul trapped on a mountain ridge as a firestorm roasts the world alive. Everything is flame, everything is

noise. All around, wall gun emplacements, terrepleins and turrets unleash a torrential pelt of shells, beams and projectiles. But as fast as they rain death upon the traitor host, they drain the Sanctum's dwindling munition stocks. Batteries burn out, their systems unable to maintain the intense fire rate. Autoloader systems jam inside the walls. Macro-las weapons overheat, and blow out the gun-boxes and bartizans containing them.

The enemy assault delivers an equal and answering bombardment from below. Their munition supplies seem inexhaustible. Swarms of missiles, constellations of fireballs, and seething lances of energy remorselessly maul the defensive ring. The Delphic's void shields convulse under the onslaught, the walls glow. The host below is uncountable; uncountable beasts driving uncountable siege machines up the ramps of their own uncountable dead. Scaling ladders climb like vines, groping for the summit, replaced as fast as they are burned away or levered back. Siege engines fight and jostle to suckle at the ravelins and outwork parapets. For each one that topples, victim of the wall guns, another dozen roll through the burning wreckage to take its place. The booming voices of the enemy's war-horns are a weapon in themselves, drowning out the burst of shells and the detonation of explosive rain, bursting eardrums, turning guts to jelly, grinding sanity into a pulp of wet terror.

From the battlements of the last wall, the enemy below is a sea, a deluge, an engulfing ocean of hatred and rage. In its black swell, a billion baleful eyes glare upwards, a billion voices scream obscenities and blasphemies. Not all are human. Some once were, some are warp-bred and Neverborn. The daemons charge and flock, squealing and baying, swooping at the wall-top on ragged wings, bounding at the wall-foot on cloven hooves, beating at the enciente's stonework with bladed fists, ploughing through their own allies to reach the last wall and sunder it.

Nothing stands forever.

Yet for some of the defenders, it feels as though they *will* stand forever. Nassir Amit, called Flesh Tearer, struggles to master the impatience in his heart. He has been standing, motionless, for nine hours.

His company, designated 'Denial 963', is drawn up on the reserve stages of the wall's inner level, below the casemates and fighting platforms. He has eighty-three men. All are Blood Angels of the IX, though they did not

begin the war as this unit. They are all survivors of the Eternity Gate, squads and sections of decimated companies recomposed as a makeshift new one. Denial 963 is one of twenty companies being held at readiness on this wall section alone. They are armed, they are plated, they are oathed, but their moment is yet to come.

To Amit's right waits Denial 774, a similarly patchwork company of White Scars commanded by the worthy Hemheda. To his left is Denial 340, a unit hastily woven from Salamanders and Iron Hands, commanded by a Wolf of Fenris called Sartak. Hemheda is as still and silent as Amit, but Sartak paces in front of his ranks, muttering and cursing.

They wait. All of them. All twenty companies. This has been instructed. These are their orders. They wait, even though the wall shakes below them, and the voids ripple overhead. They can hear the roar of artillery emplacements along the fighting platforms above them, and see the flash of fire-sprays bursting against the parapet.

Sartak stops pacing.

'Where is Honfler?' he snaps. He gazes over at Amit. 'Where?' he snarls.

Amit makes no reply. The Space Wolf's lack of discipline annoys him, though he shares his frustration. To stand and not fight feels wrong. But those are the orders. Praetor-Captain Honfler of the Imperial Fists has command of this wall section, and his orders were both clear and utterly in accordance with principles of siege repulse set down by the Praetorian. Until the enemy achieves scale or breach of the enceinte, the defence of a wall line is the province of the batteries and wall guns. There is little that a warrior, even an Astartes legionary, can do on the fighting platforms.

Until the enemy arrives in person.

Until then, to commit all forces to the parapet is to lose men to enemy barrage for no reason. So they must stand, held in reserve on the comparative safety of the staging levels, waiting for the command to come.

It is a bitter contradiction. Amit yearns to fight. He yearns to close and kill. It feels wrong to be standing here, waiting for war, when war is only a few hundred metres away. Amit wants to be unleashed.

But if that desire is satisfied, it will mean they have lost. It will mean the batteries are spent, and the voids have failed, and the ramparts overrun. For Amit's wish to be fulfilled, the enemy must invade the final fortress.

And so they stand, his company, and so many others like it, longing to

fight yet willing the order not to come. For when it comes, the siege will be over, the Warmaster triumphant, the last sanctuary violated. Amit, and men like him, will no longer be fighting to win, or even survive. They will simply be fighting to punish the triumphant.

However much Amit wants a fight, he does not want that one. He tries not to wish for it, however heavy and thirsty his sword feels in his hand.

‘Where is Honfler?’ Sartak bawls. He hoists his war-axe onto his shoulder and strides over to Amit, until they are nose-to-nose.

‘Where is he?’ the Wolf growls. ‘That fool? We stand here forever!’

‘Nothing stands forever, brother,’ Amit replies, unmoving.

Sartak stares back with a frown. He thinks about it. The grim logic dawns on him. He starts to laugh, the mordant laughter of resignation and death-glory Amit has heard so often from Sartak’s Legion.

‘Good,’ he says. ‘That’s good. I like you, Angel-son. A dark wit. Damned if we do, eh?’

‘Damned *when* we do,’ says Amit.

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5:viii

Inferno

Almost all of me is gone now.

All gone. Gone and damned.

I can’t–

The layers of my self have peeled away in the heat, reduced to ash… *Sigillite, Imperial Regent, Master of the Chosen*, these parts of me have burned away, one by one, even my human self and form, even the name *Malcador*.

I–

Aah–

All gone. Almost all of me.

These things, these names, these titles, these sigils that have represented me during my life, have been systematically erased by the Throne, and all that remains is a sigil of pain.

The Throne. The Golden Throne. The burning Throne. *Curse the bastard thing! It is eating me alive–*

I–

I'm sorry, old friend, if you can hear me. Can you? I do this for you, *always* for you. I have no regrets. It's just the pain. The devouring fire–

But I do not know how much longer I will last. The slow instant of my death, which began the moment I took this seat, has been drawn out into an unbearable eternity by the un-when, but it must end. What–

Ahn. What willpower I have left, what self, is finite. I dwindle, old friend. The end of my everlasting moment of death is approaching, and I fear it will come too soon, before–

–before the work is done and the war settled.

Mhn. *Nnh*. I don't think he can hear me any more. I can barely *see* him.

I am old and I am tired. I am weak, my strength sapped by this task. My straining sight is beginning to fade, for my eyes are long gone and my mind is going. I can no longer see my beloved master as clearly, or follow his progress through the horrorscape of the first-found's flagship. What little I can see is granted to me by the grace of Horus, who tempts and taunts me with these visions in the hope that they will break–

–break me.

Nggh!

But I hold on, still.

Just.

Barely.

And what little I *can* still see, the scraps and flickers, gives me no hope.

My greatest lord and oldest friend advances towards the lair of the first-found monster, one hard-fought step after the next, through a place where all sense has fled. All reason.

Chaos prevails. My ailing mindsight sees only absolute madness.

Oh, my King-of-Ages!

Despite my long life and my frequent interaction with the immaterium, I have *never* seen the warp so wholly unleashed. And I believe that even my lord has only *glimpsed* its like before; on Molech, perhaps… in the furious

surreality of the webway… in his darkest fears.

Such a sight. Such vile, atrocious–

No.

If my lord can bear that, then I can bear this. *Focus*, Sigillite! *Focus, you useless old man!* Ignore the pain and concentrate on the work. Use the mindsight vision of your old friend as a drishti to distract yourself from the agonies devouring your soul–

Yes. Better. That's better. Focus on him. The sight of him. *There*. My King-of-Ages, and in such a place. It–

It reminds me, perhaps, of Hell, of Gehenna, of the old religious concept of an inferno, of the *infernus immanis*, of the Pit, of an underworld where all the comforting laws of nature have been abandoned, along with hope, and replaced by pain and horror. Yes, exactly that. *Uncannily* that.

I have long believed that the human concept of a 'hell', which has haunted mankind down the ages, and informed the structures of its makeshift religions, is derived from the warp. Of course, in latter years, this vivid concept was tamed, by theologians and philosophers, into allegory and symbolic fable.

But it comes from somewhere. It comes from the warp, from flashes of the empyrean's tumult glimpsed, through the ages, by certain people in their dreams and waking nightmares: the nascent psykers, the prophetics, the visionaries, the far-sighted, and the wielders of imagination. They wrote of it, in verse and prose, and painted pictures.

I have seen these works, a great many of them, for my lord the Emperor collected them. Many he selected by hand from the inventory of cultural treasures that the Order of Sigillites had preserved during the Age of Strife. He did this, I believe, out of fascination or sentiment, if such feelings are within his compass. The artefacts are stored in secret depositories adjoining the private archives of the Sigillites beneath the Palace. From time to time, as Regent, I used to visit the hidden collections and puzzle over the images. They were all so *similar*.

I now see why. I can no longer visit the private galleries at Leng and the Clanium, but watching him, I can see artworks come to life. Eternal damnation–

I can *see* it.

It is *real*–

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5:ix

Alone

The tempest squalls of depravity blast the Emperor and His companions. The warp-wrath is fluid, churning, a shifting fume that seethes and kaleidoscopes, becoming solid to strike and liquid spray when struck. It conjures patterns and scales, sparks and unknown colours, blisters of terror and scabs of madness. Hook-toothed jaws lunge out of it, snapping at them, then recede to nothing in mists of onierolysis as fast as they came. Eyes glare. Clawed limbs and tentacles sprout from air and deck and ceiling, lashing at them, a thousand every collapsing un-minute.

Caecaltus Dusk endures as his master endures.

I know the unbreakable resolve of my King-of-Ages. I am the steel of His will. I feel the conflagrant light of His power. He will not let this be the end of the Earth, the terminal fate of mankind, or the end of Himself. He will not let your ruination triumph.

He endures because He is strong.

And you, Horus, have made Him so.

The Master of Mankind continues to draw upon the very power unleashed against Him. He steals it, just as He stole fire on Molech, and hurls it back.

He casts flame-storms from His fingertips with such force that the shrilling Neverborn, live-birthed out of the vortex, incinerate before they have full substance, and the ship's corridors, briefly recalling the metal from which they were once made, burst and shred from the overpressure. His sword, a blade of blazing sunlight, cleaves materia and immateria alike, and fills the air with scalding blood-steam. His fury is boundless.

So is this hell.

The bestial Neverborn instantiate everywhere, massed and wailing legions of the damned, the manifest armies of pandaemonium, in unvanquishable numbers. They seek to kill Him, not just in body, but in His entirety. Horns and fangs and slicing talons swarm to shred Him: to tear armour from flesh, and flesh from bone, and soul from body. They seek to destroy not just His mortal shell but the perpetual spark within Him.

He will not be beaten. He will not be turned back. Though Chaos assaults the Emperor with unprecedented ire, unleashing its power in a condensed paroxysm that exceeds all the warp events in human history, He will not back down. He meets the excess of Chaos with its own excess, pushing His own power beyond any cautious restrictions He has previously respected. He has always been a conduit too, resilient enough to tolerate the burning wire of immaterial force that sizzles in His blood. He has been training Himself to stand it for more than thirty thousand years. He has conditioned Himself to bear its force, to tap it, to use it, to inhale its fire and breathe it back in the faces of the Chaos Pantheon. They have opened the sunless sea of the empyrean to Him, and so He drinks from it to magnify His own almighty power.

The False Four are fools if they think this display of excess can overwhelm Him. It empowers Him, Horus Lupercal, it empowers Him. It feeds Him an excess of His own. He is set on this path, first-found, and He will find His way to you. He will carve a sure and inexorable road through your labyrinth of madness, His sword in His right hand and fire in His left, and meet you.

He will find you.

In the midst of Chaos, the Emperor finds there is, within Him, an invincible calm. Caecaltus feels it flood through him like ice-water. It is so shockingly pure, tears spring from his eyes.

This day will not save you, Horus, for you have broken day and night and

the circuit of time. You have built an eternity here, a frozen infinite without laws, presuming that will protect you and confound your father. It will do neither. If this is your trap, your endgame ploy, it has sprung and failed. Your father was a master of this art for one hundred and twenty thousand generations before you were whelped. You have made a shrieking parody of the world for nothing. If this is your snare, first-found, the eye of your storm of terror, it is an eternity that will not last. It will break. It is but eternity in an hour, or a day, eternity in a heartbeat. At the still point of this turning world, where past and future are gathered and inert, some work of note may yet be done. To you, my lord may have seemed like an idle king, perched on a distant throne, made weak by time and fate, but He is strong in will. So very strong. Stronger now than ever before, He will strive. He will seek you out. He will not yield.

The empyric deluge has destroyed the war-systems of all the Hetaeron Companions. Their comms are burned out, their auspexes fused, their sensoria blinded. Caecaltus cannot see what is around the next twist or turn of the maze, and those twists and turns shift and change like hallucinations anyway. There is no point predicting, for there is no future to predict.

My lord's armour systems are likewise ruined. He listens instead for the telltale crackle of the warp, the spit and sear of the blaze inside you. Glutted with the power He takes from you, Horus, He metes out what little He can spare, investing us and reinforcing us. Our bodies, so precisely constructed, can each bear a little. He makes us stronger. He makes us parts of Him.

The Emperor pushes forwards. He amplifies the Hetaeron, one equal temper of heroic hearts. He pours His mindsight into them and they become additional eyes and ears and hands. Through them, He reads the real, or what remains of it, the broken slivers of sound materia that drift in the fevered insanity, the fragments of deck and flooring they can trust. They leap from one foundering scrap of reality to the next, frail and unsteady stepping stones in the void, as the warp soughs around them.

By His will.

Through Caecaltus, He sees the winged spawn ahead, and hacks it asunder before it strikes. Through Taurid and Ravengast, He holds the flank against drooling fiends and ulcerated miscreations. Through Nmembo and Zagrus, He guards the rear, driving back the snarling, screeching things that bulge

from the exoplanar membrane and fly at them like spittle, snapping at their heels. Through Xadophus and Karedo, stalwart at His left and right, He discerns the path.

By His will alone.

Together, as one, moving and fighting as one cohesive entity, they cut their way into the *Vengeful Spirit*'s dark and broken heart.

And they harrow its hell.

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5:x

Waiting in darkness for the end

A noose of darkness has tightened around Collection 888 and its faded portraits of hell and perdition. The shadows have swelled and expanded since Loken left them, and the temperature has steadily dropped, despite the library's advanced climate control. According to the system's wall panels, ambient temperature and humidity are being kept constant, but Sindermann can feel the cold in his bones.

They wait awhile to see if Loken will return, but he does not. Eventually, Sindermann leaves his bench beneath one of some eighty-first-century sculptor's stranger works, suspended in a cone of soft light, and crosses to the hatch. He has no idea how long they've waited. It feels like hours, but the clocks have all frozen. His own pocket-chron has begun to wind backwards. Mauer and the archivist watch him.

The hatch is firmly sealed. The lock mechanism, when he finally, gingerly, touches it, refuses to respond. It's cold. So is the hatch, and the wall around it. He can see a powder of ice crystals beginning to form. It feels as though there is an immeasurable chill on the far side, the absolute cold of the open void, and that the heat of the library chamber is slowly leaching out.

Perhaps there is, thinks Sindermann. Perhaps this is the heat-death that accompanies Ruin. Time stagnated, places overlapped, reality wound up tight in a ball of coterminous moments, bleeding away heat and light in a slow decay.

He looks back at the others and shrugs.

‘He’s not coming back, is he?’ asks Mauer.

‘To Garviel,’ says Sindermann, ‘it may seem like he’s only been gone a few moments.’ He walks back to join them.

‘Really?’ asks Mauer. ‘You really think that time a-and space…’

She trails off.

‘Yes,’ he says.

Mauer shudders and shakes her head.

‘I know you’re a creature of order and discipline, boetharch,’ he says gently, ‘but you’re also a great pragmatist. I’m surprised you’re not accepting the state we find ourselves in.’

‘I don’t know how you can be so calm,’ she replies.

‘Oh, I’m not,’ he assures her. ‘This derangement of the cosmos is entirely disturbing. It’s nigh on impossible to process. But it’s not hard to accept, given all the evidence we’ve seen. I suppose I can’t see the point in panicking.’

He shakes his head wearily.

‘Or I haven’t got the energy to panic,’ he adds.

‘I can’t process it at all,’ says Mauer.

‘These last months, Mauer,’ he says, sitting down beside her, ‘we’ve seen so many things… Things that defied credibility. Things beyond imagination. And you’ve faced them down. But *now* your capacity runs out?’

‘Monsters, nightmares,’ she mutters. ‘I can face those. But this is everything. The very fabric of the world, the rules and laws of matter. There is nothing left I can count on, nothing I can trust. Not the ground beneath me, not the air, not the passing of the minutes, not even my own mind.’

Sindermann sighs.

‘Then I believe,’ he says sadly, ‘that the Emperor has failed us.’

The archivist looks at him in alarm.

‘He should have prepared us. Told us. Taught us. Not just you and me, the whole of humanity. He has this entire archive of evidence. Warnings from

the distant past. But He keeps it shut away. He should have educated us so that we could have prepared. He should have shared what He knew so that we'd be ready.'

He rubs his hands together to keep warm.

'But He chose not to. He deprived us of all spiritual appreciation, and thus we come to this moment supremely unfit and unqualified to face it.'

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5:xi

That which passeth all understanding

Those works of art–

Gng.

Nhh. *Focus*.

Those works. My lord should have destroyed those works of art and madness, but I believe he could never bring himself to do it. They were, in their own way, beautiful. In each one, I think, he saw himself. He saw the minds of people like him, who obtained one fleeting glimpse, perhaps by force of will, and were forever changed, and thereafter compelled to create some record of what they had seen. Those poor souls… All of them scarred because their minds were too acute. They were often deemed mad, and their work dismissed as fancy. But two qualities were always obvious to me. The first was the astonishing *commonality* of their visions. There were too many similarities for them all to have imagined them separately. Through some mysterious action of immense synchronicity, they all saw the same thing.

They saw what I see now. They saw what my old friend is experiencing

first-hand.

The second was that paint, and pencil, charcoal, words, rhyme… None of the tools at their disposal could begin to do justice to the truth. One may shiver at the sight of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* or the *The Great Day Of His Wrath*, but they are mere hints, mere suggestions, as through a glass darkly.

The truth is not the leaping flames, the ragged blight, the sundering peaks, the dripping venom, or the curling thorns; the truth is not the devilish blasphemies that, ungainly and beyond all reason, caper and squeal their danse in the fiery glow. It is not the things that my lord and his last golden companions are cutting their way through with blade and bolt. Physical horror can be assimilated and ignored. The real truth is the sense of *senselessness*.

We–

We are too used to living in a world of materia, a commonplace realm tightly governed by laws and the parameters of physics, of logic, of order and sanity. I see now that the greatest horror in the material universe is as nothing compared to a brief *instant* of the warp's totality. All laws are shed, all rules vacated, all truths untruthed. My lord feels it in the very molecules around him. Nothing behaves as it should. Nothing is reliable. Nothing can be trusted. All is Chaos, in the most literal sense. Once you are within the realm of Chaos, nothing retains the semblance of sense.

He has never come this close to it before. He has never allowed it to surround him. My King-of-Ages has always had a lifeline, or a path back, a throne to anchor him, or a beacon to light him. He has only ever stepped one foot over the threshold. Even at his most daring, he has never entered entire, without some strategy for escape.

Well, no longer.

Just like me, the *Vengeful Spirit* is devoured by the warp. The material fabric of the great ship is corrupted. What my Emperor advances through, one pace at a time, fighting for every step with his last few men at his side, is an infusion of materia and immateria that still partly and occasionally resembles a Gloriana-class, Scylla-pattern warship.

There are stretches of apparently solid decks and hallways, arches and

chambers, locations that my lord recognises, but they are *not* those things. They are fitful recollections of the ship, old memories of the *Vengeful Spirit* made real in haphazard flashes, lumped together in illogical sequences, then forgotten again just as abruptly, in foams of voidmist. This is a fluid, approximate memory of the flagship rendered by the immaterial, like water trying to remember what it was like to be ice.

And those old memories–

Gah! *Mmnn!*

They are his memories, I think. Horus' memories. His derangement is extreme if this is the best recollection he can conjure.

The warp is in our first-found enemy now, far beyond *any* limits he was built to withstand.

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5:xii

Upon the face of Terra

In the whispering darkness of the Lupercal Court, you wander, blind, hands outstretched to feel your way. Like you, the place has flexed and changed. Nothing is the same. Even the darkness is a different kind of darkness.

You are drowning Terra in the immaterial, and everything is washing together and blurring into one, like pigments on a wall, flushed by rain, the painted images dissolving and the colours running. Whatever was painted there before is no longer visible. Was it a man? A landscape? Some animals, perhaps? It doesn't matter, for it no longer has any significance. The dyes and colours have leaked and blended, diluted in the immaterial wash, and this new darkness is the result.

In it, your groping fingers feel the shapes and forms of things as they are now. *Vengeful Spirit* and world mixed together. Ship and palace. Sky and land. Steel and stone. Inside and out. Above and below. It's all become one thing, a tangled, knotted connection that is now impossible to navigate. As soon as your father led His assault on board – a bold, brave step – you allowed the impossibility to descend, and enfolded Him in your trap. He has no way out, no way back. There is only one place for Him to go.

In this new darkness with no future, there is only you. You and the throne you will sit on, and the Court that surrounds that throne, and the palace that surrounds that Court. Your palace, a city. An eternal city. A city that encompasses the galaxy. It was always going to be this way. It was always coming to this. It was inevitable.

Your Inevitable City. Your realm.

You decide you want to see it. You are Horus Lupercal, and you're ready.

You call for a light, and something brings you a light. Fire crackles around your hand as you raise it and illuminate the Court.

There are five thrones. That surprises you, just for a moment, until you remember that nothing should surprise you because you made it that way.

Five thrones. One is for you. It must be.

The others are seats of honour for the four powers of your ascendancy. Change, blood, delight, decay. The four cardinals of the compass of Chaos. The four quarters of the eightfold star. They await the avatars of those potent properties. They are part of the gifts.

Of course they are. That's how you planned it.

Here, the four powers of Chaos will be represented, two at your right hand, two at your left. You wonder which of them will end up occupied? You have always been a gracious host. You honour those who come to you. Which of them will refuse you and spurn your invitation?

Your gifts were generous. Handmade. Personalised. Extravagant. Decay, for the beautiful Angel, a rebirth from the mortal wounds of life. Blood, for dear Rogal, a feral liberation from the stifling order of his regimented mind, a blessed release into the oblivion of Chaos where he can at last forget decision and become the unthinking warrior he always craved to be. For stern Constantin, the liberation of change, allowing him to renounce the harsh and blinkered strictures of his life and become more, become emancipated, no longer a blindly obedient servant but instead a free-thinking being, alert with the secrets that were always kept from him.

And for your father, delight. The reward of pleasure, of pride, the licence to be, at last, what He has always truly been, and to relish that state, no longer burdened by responsibility or destiny, no longer hobbled by the urge to guide or command, no longer crippled by the demands of a thirty-thousand-year-long plan. Here He may sit, and rest, and indulge, and rejoice in power for the sake of power alone. Mankind can make its sorry way

without Him. He need never give the human species another thought.

Henceforth, the plans will all be yours.

If they accept your gifts, well… What a wonder that will be. This Court will be full, and joyous, and glorious. You, ascendant, above all others, exactly where you belong, and the four of them, a council of power, a new Mournival to hang upon your every word, and to do your bidding.

Will they accept? Some of them might. Sadly, you think some of them might not. As an ascendant mind, you see these things clearly. Some things cannot be changed, even though past and future, just like here and there, no longer exist and have become one. What they were before will be hard to undo, even though it is now inevitable. Rogal is yours, you're sure of that. The blood rises in him and cannot be staunched. Sanguinius, whom you've always loved, he too will embrace your gift, for who would turn aside the gift of life itself when proffered by a brother's hand? He will come and sit at your side. Indeed, you think he's close, close to seeing the truth of everything. He always saw so much more than others. The sight of the Inevitable City will seem like a relief.

Of Constantin, you have graver hesitation, for his doubts have been there since before you were born. His envy of you and your brothers runs too deep. He would have had you killed long since, you and all your kind. But then, he isn't really a man. He has so little free will, so little understanding. He is the way your father made him, just an instrument. A fine one, no doubt, a peerless one, but you might as well command a sword to stop being a sword or a spear to stop being a spear. Poor Constantin is merely duty and obedience in human form, and he doesn't know enough about anything to know any better.

And your father. He is, in His way, the most likely to accept. But His ego is the obstacle. He has always known best, and after thirty millennia that self-belief is so engrained, it has fossilised. It will no longer bend, only break.

You hope it *does* break. Your offerings are genuinely intended, but if they are rejected, then you won't hesitate. If, to your surprise, your father accepts, then you will be glad. You will be together again, as you were for those three perfect decades long ago. But you don't think He will, and you privately hope He doesn't. His time is done. He needs to end, and you have been longing to end Him. You loved Him once, above all others, but you

hate Him now, for His falseness and lies. *Reject my gift, father. Put up your fists and fight me. I so very much want to kill you*.

You sigh. The darkness whispers. It's whispering your name, you're fairly sure of that.

You wonder which of the thrones is meant for you. The fifth one. But which is the fifth? The largest one? It must be. That must be the one meant for you. A throne fit for a god.

The clocks have stopped. Time's gone. But you are impatient. They must be close now, but they are taking so long. It's time to finish this, to bring it to an end, or at least a death.

You walk through the living, breathing darkness, brushing whispers aside like gossamer, to the door of the Court. It opens for you, because it cannot resist your will. You will wait for your new Mournival in the hall, ready to escort them in so they can take their places. Power sings inside you.

Outside, the hall is vast and gloomy and very quiet. The *Vengeful Spirit* abides here, but the chamber is more than that. The Inevitable City has been opened to honour your ascension.

You step into it.

You step from the Lupercal Court into the immense hall and, for the first time since this all began, you finally set foot on the surface of Terra.

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5:xiii

Things change

In the midst of it all, in the heart of the burning Palace, certain moments pass, virtually unnoticed, moments of profound significance whose ramifications will change everything, but which are lost in the fog and the filth and the derangement.

One is the end of the primacy of the human Imperium. It has been ascendant for nearly three centuries, a cultural edifice that has encompassed thousands of worlds, the single greatest military power in the galaxy. That military power, that prowess, the legend of the indomitable Astartes, the inexhaustible Army, the matchless fleets, is both the symbol and the reason for its supremacy.

Somewhere, in the smoking darkness, in an instant that flits by unnoticed, that changes. The Imperial war machine stops. It keeps fighting, and fighting valiantly, but there is a shift in its collective mindset. It is no longer the greatest thing. It has met something greater. That greater something is not military at all, and it is ultimately immune from injury, no matter how many rounds and rockets and missiles and shells are thrown at it.

It is a slow, corrosive, existential dissonance that will not be fully

recognised for decades, or even centuries. The great Imperium, if it survives this day, may continue to fight and even dominate. But it is no longer supreme.

It has met its match. And its match is an immortal, unbridled force that almost no one had realised was there.

The Imperium's idea of itself has been broken forever.

The other thing of significance that passes, unmarked, obscured by fire, is the integrity of the final fortress. Like the Imperium's supremacy, it is lost long before anyone realises it.

Ekron Fal and Vorus Ikari, Sons of Horus, side by side, lead the storm assault against the Delphic Battlement. Fal's dread Justaerin hammer the monumental defences with heavy fire as Ikari's company, the malefic Fourth, advance under shield with war engines of Mortis striding in their midst. The two leaders, at once partners and rivals in this action, jostle for supremacy. They are the tip of the Warmaster's spear, but each wants the honour whole. Whoever breaks the wall first, whoever leads the tide of rout into the splintering final fortress, will doubtless claim the rank of First Captain from Abaddon, for Abaddon is absent. And anyway, Abaddon is a relic, a piece of yesterday no longer fit to serve, nor strong enough to lead. This glory is too bright for the old First Captain, this effort too great. Ezekyle Abaddon's era is done. This is their time.

They strike with unfettered savagery and merciless precision, foul parodies both of the once-lauded Astartesian principles, Fal's monstrous strength matched only by Ikari's astounding cruelty.

Streams of macro shells puncture the Delphic's adamantine lip. Pylons topple like fir trees in a hurricane. Resonators and relays explode in scorching flares of discharge. Torrents of sparks cascade down the battered wall, and flutter like banners in the wind and rain.

A section of the void shield has collapsed.

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5:xiv

Light the fire

In the shadow of the Hollow Mountain, the Death Guard assault collapses backwards, crumbling from the cliffs and down into the lonely pass.

The sons of the Lion roar their defiance, clashing bloody swords against buckled shields.

It is but brief respite, time to clean and cauterise wounds, to re-edge blades and reload guns. Without question, the traitors, fearfully mauled, will regroup and come at them again. The fury of Typhus, his hatred for Corswain and the First, burns like a fever that refuses to break. He will not let them go. He will plague them and scour them until naught but their sticky bones remain in the twilight air.

‘Where did you come from, lord?’ Corswain asks, his breathing laboured from supreme exertion. He is swathed in gore as though he has bathed in it.

‘I told you, Hound of Caliban… do not ask,’ says Cypher, no less badged in blood.

Corswain shakes his head.

‘Not good enough,’ he says. ‘At other times, perhaps, but not here. Not now. The end of the Throneworld is a torrid place of phantoms and lies, and

I need to trust you.’

‘Have I not already proven my worth and trust, your grace?’

‘Aye, you have. Prove it further. Put all doubt from my mind.’

‘I come because you need me,’ says Cypher quietly. ‘I come because these Dark Angels need proof that you are worthy, that you carry the authority of the Great Lion in this war, and should be followed unto death. I come from the spirit of the First Legion, for therein I dwell. I have always been here with you. I appear only in the direst of times, when the sight of me may fortify courage more vitally than any flag or standard.’

‘The Emperor sent you to us,’ says Corswain.

‘If that is what you believe, then that is the truth of it,’ says Cypher.

Corswain kneels to him, and bows his head. Around him, others kneel too, Harlock and Tragan, Blamires and Bruktas, Vanital and Vorlois, three dozen more besides, and more beyond that, hulking, plated figures smeared in blood and streaked with mire, their blades gathered to their breasts under their bowed chins.

Weapons sheathed, Cypher bends down and grips Corswain’s head with both hands. He tilts his face up until Corswain cannot help but gaze into Cypher’s masked eyes.

‘You have been away a long time, lord seneschal,’ Cypher says. ‘I had to be sure of your loyalty before I came to your side.’

‘As I needed to be sure of yours,’ says Corswain. ‘In the madness of this war, it has been hard to tell friend from foe.’

Cypher grasps him by the wrists and pulls him to his feet. ‘This I understand,’ says Cypher. ‘And it is only right. Doubt is part of a true warrior’s armour. But so is trust. Do you doubt still?’

Corswain hesitates, but he feels, for the first time in months, that there is a light upon him, as though some greater power is suddenly shining forth and renewing his faltering strength.

He shakes his head.

‘Then the spirit of the First is whole for now, my lord,’ says Cypher, ‘and may it remain so until the end of this great trial.’

‘Will we claim the field here?’ Corswain asks.

‘We will drive the Death Guard to rout, or die trying,’ Cypher replies. ‘And more besides.’

‘What more?’

‘We will relight the fire of this mountain, and bring hope to Terra.’

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5:xv

Fragments

The sky is a wide, fierce netherscape, fractured by lightning and distended by bellying smoke. Black rain falls, a monsoon of sheeting force that pummels and sluices and drenches. Where the monumental clouds part, the night sky can be glimpsed, filled with stars. But the night is just the lightless flesh of the enveloping warp, and the stars are baleful, unblinking eyes.

Tjaras Grunli of the Rout, wolf-born, takes his last breath.

He lies on his back in the ruins of the Irenic Barbican, his shoulders propped against an ouslite slab, like a body laid out on a mortuary block. He is too mutilated to move. Around him lie the corpses of Blood Angels and Imperial Fists, of White Scars, of Salamanders, of Shattered Legion warriors and of the finest Excertus mortals, each one fallen in turn until only Grunli remains, gore-haired and wet-axed. Across the bodies of his fallen brothers sprawl the carcasses of the Death Guard Grunli took down in vengeance and arch defiance until he was too wounded to stand.

The sky is black smog, so low it seems to be almost touching his face.

Stars, half-seen, wink through the pall. They seem to be watching him. He wonders if any of them are the same stars that rose in the winter nights of Fenris.

Vorx of the Death Guard has left him for dead. No execution stroke, no honouring death-blow for a worthy adversary.

And Grunli *is* dead. He knows it. He inhales, and knows it is the last breath he will ever take, the last breath he has the strength to draw. When he lets it out, there will not be another.

But he holds onto it. He holds onto it as a last scrap of life, a last bubble of heat and air, for while it is in his blood-filled lungs, he is not yet gone.

The Neverborn that skitter and writhe at the heels of the Death Guard, an honour train of the diseased, the maggot-mouthed and the corpse-gnawing that follow the pestilential XIV wherever it goes, begin to close in, sniffing and yapping, daring each other to inch closer to the fallen Wolf. Among them shuffle the hunched, cadaverous haruspices who, with hooks and loop knives, will read the future in his entrails once he has breathed his last.

Tjaras Grunli refuses to exhale.

Sojuk of the White Scars plants his tulwar through the head of a Word Bearer. It takes the leverage of his heel to pull the blade free again.

Enclosed by rings of flame in the ruins of Gallium Bar, he leads his brothers in what is becoming an eternal raid. There is no greater strategy, no command from Archamus or the Hegemon. The vox is nothing but a dry-brush crackle of nonsense. So they stay in motion, reaving, killing, chasing through the tormented dereliction of the open field, assaulting whatever they can.

This motion-war is contrary to the philosophies of his brothers, the Imperial Fists and the Blood Angels. Sojuk is surprised that they still follow him, his rank be damned. But in nine hours, as best as he can count, they have made thirty-two engagements, and he has led them to victory in each one. He has won something more valuable than rank. He has won respect.

They pause upon a cliff of bruised masonry above a ditch of burning bodies. From Gallium, he expects to see the prospect of Hindress Fort and the southern Palatine batteries. Instead, he sees a broken monument that looks for all the world like the Lion’s Gate.

But that cannot be, unless the maelstrom of war has bewildered them and

led them further astray than he has reckoned. Sojuk ventures it is some other monument, some other gate. He doesn't know the Palace well, and that ignorance hardly matters, for all he is searching for is an enemy to hunt. Where that hunt happens has no significance.

There is movement in the silted gulches and thread-trenches to their west. An enemy formation of some size, greater than his own dwindling force, but slow where he will be fast.

He nods to it.

'What hope is there?' a Hort Kalizan soldier nearby asks, fatigued to the edge of his wits.

'None,' Sojuk tells him.

'But–'

'Hope drains you,' Sojuk says, 'because it promises too much. Be glad you're shot of it. When you have nothing left to hope for, you have nothing left to fear.'

Death dilates.

In the ravaged expanses of the Palatine, units of both sides – beleaguered loyalists and invading traitors – churn for position in the elemental deluge. Beset by wildfire, by keening winds, by sheeting black rain, by lethal banks of gas and smoke, they fight to secure footholds, to manoeuvre, to find shelter, to orientate themselves. The warscape betrays them at every turn.

On fields of sucking mud, Excertus units stagger through the downpour, scanning for landmarks they can use to find bearings now their compasses spin and lie. Huddled in earthworks and hammered trench systems, Auxilia brigades scope for contacts, no longer sure which way they are pointing. Limping, scarred armour groups stalk through gutted street blocks, turning in maddened circles as their guidance systems give back nothing but gibberish. Mechanicus formations stop and freeze, unable to process accurate routes, unable to execute pre-coded battle plans. Astartes units, trying to regroup, but no longer trusting their sensoria, slither uneasily through cracked culverts, and cross shattered roads, hunting for notations that match the plan of the Palace they carry in their maps and memories. Many have removed their helms, trusting eyes more than visors.

Many on both sides glimpse distant structures through the deluge, the towers and elevations of a city still standing, the black cliffs of fortress

walls. They recognise nothing. Skylines refuse to match. Identifiable structures, seen from far off, are not where they should be, or stand beside other structures that were never in their vicinity. Worse, the combatants catch sight of buildings and monuments that they know have already fallen.

Nothing is true. No scope or rangefinder can be believed. Officers, their nerves already shredded, blame atmospheric mirages, fata morganas, the sanity of their scouts and observers, the trustworthiness of their original data. Many doubt they are even where they believed they were.

Units turn. They reposition. They circle aimlessly. They advance on enemy positions only to discover the enemy suddenly behind them. Some quit safe entrenchments, and blunder directly into killing fields. Some move for safety to find better cover, and find themselves securing strangely familiar dug-outs.

Men are executed for these mistakes. Men despair. Men go mad at the sight of walls and bastion towers that they know have long perished in battles that took the lives of their comrades, but which loom through the vapour as distant, taunting ghosts.

At what remains of Targus Point, the 55th Pan-Polar advances under fire, making a near-suicidal push to reposition their field guns and supply a vital covering barrage for the Maglex Rifles they are flanking. It is a costly, gruelling effort, but the commander of the 55th finally gets his regiment into place on a rainswept escarpment, and begins his bombardment. The medium artillery pieces, over two hundred guns, thump and recoil for ten minutes, lighting up a belt of the field three kilometres away. Only then does the commander learn that the 55th is somehow turned about and, despite hauling his cannons through the murk under fire, he is on the other flank of the Maglex line and has been shelling them the whole time.

The Pan-Polar commander reads the ragged paper that the speechless despatch runner has brought him. He orders firing cease, hands his officer’s sword to a nearby lieutenant, and walks towards the wire, never to be seen again.

At the VTC-26 Batteries, just west of Irenic, the 414th Ludovic finally charges, and takes a row of blockhouses that has held out against them for over an hour. Storming inside to plant their Imperialis standards, all they find are the crumpled dead of the Ninth Gustav and their own burning banners of the Emperor.

The massed forces of the enemy, every bit as bewildered as the loyalist lines, forge ahead. They need no maps, no bearings, not even eyes. The Pantheon of Four has shown them the way and told them the truth: all paths lead to the same place. The destination is inevitable.

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A place to stand

The Metome Processional has run out, vanishing into the mauled earth like the rotting line of a wooden breakwater receding into wet sand where the sea has eaten it away. There's no sign of the Metome gun-decks either. Her vague plan to make for the Delphic Line is cast aside. Unless they abandon their artillery pieces, they are too slow-moving. They are out in the open, though the horizon around them seems too close and too tight, because it is curtained by walls of ash that rise, thirty kilometres high, in every direction. When they find the black mansion, she decides it's as good a spot as anywhere. They need a place to make a stand, to dig in, to fight, and this is the only structure of substance for many kilometres.

Marshal Agathe, shutting out the constant pain in her half-swollen cheek and jaw, gives her instructions. The officers nod and hurry to their tasks. Phikes follows her inside.

The black mansion – Phikes named it when they first came in sight of it – is a large, hulking structure. Though ruined, with at least one wing reduced to rubble by recent barrages, its walls are unusually thick, and thus it has survived where virtually all the other buildings in what were once the

streets around it are levelled to slag heaps. Agathe thinks she should know it. The place seems familiar, and was clearly once a major landmark. But in an arcology of major landmarks, that means little. It is low, square-built, wide, cyclopean in frame, and entirely blackened. It has been gutted by fire at some point in the last few days, and Agathe presumes the stonework is scorched.

It will do.

The bulk of her force, some three thousand or so, remain outside, prepping the field guns which are their primary strength. She has ordered the gunnery officers to dig the guns in along overlapping lines to cover the west, with a further spur of gunlines to the east. These have been directions from which all attacks have come in the last four hours. There's some hellish firefight – a tank battle, she guesses – raging behind the ash banks twelve kilometres to their east, so she anticipates contact from that direction. Forward observers are sent out to watch for enemy movement. They're using semaphore, whistles and signal lamps, because the vox is entirely dead.

The men are exhausted from dragging the unlimbered guns and the ammunition wagons. Agathe reckons they'll be able to see an enemy unit approaching from at least two kilometres out, and thus have a grace period to use their artillery and shell the living shit out of it. If the enemy comes from a different angle – north, say, or south – it will be a different story. Her men are gunners, trenchers and light infantry. If Traitor Astartes surprise them and get close, it won't even be a fight.

The directions, east, west… They are arbitrary anyway. Compasses aren't working, suggesting some dramatic electromag disruption, and tech is fried. There's no sun to sight from, or gauge time of day. She lines her gun the way her gut tells her. Instinct's kept her alive this long. On the other hand, damned instinct has made her live *through* it this long.

If she's wrong, then her forces will pull back into the black mansion directly behind her gunlines and use its heavy walls as a stronghold. The place is built like a fort, thick walls, small windows. Was it a fort? she wonders. Was it Laufey? Or maybe Hermitage Gard? If it was Hermitage, then it's lost three or four storeys from the top, yet it doesn't look as if it was ever any taller.

She walks inside to inspect her stronghold, following Phikes. He's sent clearance teams in ahead, poor bastard trench-fighters from the 403rd, to

check for nasty surprises.

The place is gutted, but its bones are good. The walls look ten metres thick in some places. The portals and gates are stout and defensible, and show traces of portcullis and blast-door systems. Some of those hatches, still extant and as thick as the doors of bullion safes, could be freed and made to close, she reckons, if they clear some of the rubble off the floor.

There's rubble everywhere. The floors are strewn. The fire was so hot, there's no trace of furniture, fittings or bodies. She sees some twisted bars of metal among the broken stone. The place is cold now, no matter how hot the fire that cleansed it was. It sulks its chill at her. Water drips from cracked roof sections. The air is empty, and full of echoes.

'What's that?' she asks.

'Marshal?' Phikes looks back at her.

'What did you just say, Phikes?'

'I didn't speak, mam.'

Agathe frowns. Someone did.

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5:xvii

Neither here nor there

It takes Amon Tauromachian longer than he expects to conduct them to the tower.

Too long, in fact. The direct route, via Galitae Processional, somehow leads them to the Bosphorus Court. Amon doubles back. The upper end of Yulongxi should have brought them to the Pons Albedo spanning the ventilation canyon between the Hall of Marshals and the Ariadne Belvedere, but instead it takes them to the plaza below the red stone gates of the Magistary, which is thronged with panicking courtiers and long, bewildered lines of household servants clutching bundles of salvaged possessions, like aimless merchant caravans. An old man, a member of the high nobility from his robes, is standing on the low wall of the plaza's central fountain, singing some archaic song loudly, for no apparent reason. A hymn. In this day and age. How does anyone still remember the words to an old hymn?

No one is listening anyway. Amon glares at the scene, then turns around.

Melanconia Gate is blocked by rubble where a wall has toppled. Pasiphae Gate is choked with refugee columns searching for an open shelter, and

besides, through the grand arches of the gateway, Amon can see only the high-buttressed walls of the Eastern Approaches, which is where they have come from, and not the long boulevard of the Via Asterius, which is what should have been there.

The Onopion Processional, slowly filling to capacity with more displaced citizens of the Zone Imperialis, simply ends in an anonymous blank wall. Thoas Way, mysteriously empty and unlit, leads only to the ambulatory circuit of the Tauropolis. The Mytheme Conduit brings them, haphazardly, to the statue-lined courtyard west of the House of Weapons. The full crew complements of several battlefleet vessels have gathered there, some still in flight suits, listless and apprehensive. The statues on the court's many plinths have gone, without explanation, but an old man has climbed up on one, and stands, singing in a thin, reedy voice.

It looks like the same old man who had been singing in the Magistary's plaza, but Amon knows it can't be. It sounds like the same hymn too. Amon doesn't care. He's deeply troubled by the unforced detours. He knows the Palace in every detail. It's his duty to know it, and his memory is perfect. How could he have made so many mistakes?

'I am very tired,' Fo announces (for I have been walking much further than I wanted to). 'Are you lost or something, Custodian?'

'No,' says Amon.

'Well, my feet are sore,' says Fo (and they really are very sore indeed).

'Don't be such a child,' Andromeda-17 tells him.

'I am not a child,' Fo replies, 'though I would love to be one again. To be young again. Wouldn't that be nice? This body is so old and weak.'

'There are a lot of things that would be nice,' says Andromeda.

'*Are* you lost?' the Chosen, Xanthus, whispers warily to Amon.

'No,' says Amon.

Ten minutes, or what seem like ten minutes later, he has proved it. The Pons Aegeus takes them out across a vast circulation trench towards the tower. Amon ignores the fact that this is not what he intended, nor is this where the Pons Aegeus has ever previously led. He tells Xanthus something about 'needing to take an indirect route for security reasons'.

On the span of the skyway, they are assailed by the wind. In the deep gulf below them, the Palace's environmental systems move atmospheric currents with a tempest roar. The wind on their faces is not fresh. It is warm, and

smells of smoke. Amon knows that the climate of the Sanctum, as trapped and besieged as any of them, has slowly begun to degrade. It's become overloaded with toxins and compounds that even the mass recycling filters cannot handle. In the past, the Sanctum Imperialis generated its own weather patterns, with cloud formations and bands of rain collecting under the dome of the aegis shield. Now the sky above, such as it is, is soot-black, low, and flecked with capillaries of lightning. A red haze glows to the south and west. Visibility, even here, is reduced.

'Look,' says Fo, pointing, 'that crackle there. See it? Is that the shield starting to collapse? The Sanctum voids giving out and fraying along the seams?'

'No,' says Amon.

'I think it is,' says Fo (because I know full well it is).

'No,' says Amon.

From the west of them comes a long, sustained rumble that begins like a ripple of applause and then rises in intensity. They watch as the Spire of the Castellan, five kilometres away, slowly declines and slides into the canyon of the circulation trench. It starts hesitantly, with a tremble buckling the lower sections. Then the upper reaches begin to lean, with an almost languid elegance, and then the entire thing caves, collapsing into a cataract of rockcrete fragments that plunge into a rising curtain of dust.

'That can't be good,' says Fo.

'No,' says Amon. 'It can't.'

The wall of beige dust expands, caught in the air currents of the trench. It starts to race towards them like a sandstorm.

'Get inside,' says Amon.

He waits as they pass him, then takes a last look at the cityscape beyond. He wishes, dearly, that he could consult with the captain-general, and receive an unequivocal directive regarding Fo.

But the captain-general has been out of contact for hours.

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Darkness comes

It is thirty-nine seconds into the fight, and they are as good as blind.

Constantin Valdor's neuro-synergetic command is breaking down. The swaddling darkness is pervasive and almost tangible. It weights their limbs and shoulders like volcanic ash or some heavy black mantle of opulent fabrics. It leadens their minds like guilt or shame. It rains upon them, streaking their golden plate like oil. It billows around them like a blizzard of dirt, or like some nightmarish murmuration of birds, a billion dark specks flocking and turning as one. It seems to seep into his helm, into his visor, into his mouth.

Things flow and move within it, darting in its currents, things he only glimpses. Sleek bat-forms, gleaming like slate and as fluid as silk; vast shapes like winged rays trailing slipstream tails. He feels the draught of them as they rush past, the slapping impact of their swaying, shagreen wings. One veers and snatches Companion Aldeles off his feet, and they never see Aldeles again. Constantin stabs at the darting selachimorphic shadows, but they seem no more solid than the liquid smoke of the darkness.

The only light is the flash of fire: the white sparks of their bolter shots, the sheeting yellow of the last Adrathics, the scintillating blue and pink of combusting warpflux in the changeling blackness. So many flickering light sources, yet they illuminate nothing.

His company, diminishing in number, is suddenly forested by gnarled trunks of glistening meat that erupt from the fleshy floor. Like trees carved from carrion, they writhe branch-limbs that spit hellflame. The trunks, twice his height, sway in some unfelt wind, like marine anemones undulating in the current of the abyssal darkness. Their skirts billow like gills, and the fungus-flesh of their columns glitter with gelatinous scabs of frogspawn eyes that slide and froth across cauls of fat. The flame squirting from their swaying limbs melts auramite, and roasts men whole. Constantin tries to sever their limbs before they can belch flame. Some tree-things rupture and explode, others topple and collapse. The fire within them spills out and flows like pyrophoric fluid, conjuring little mocking sprites of Constantin and his men made of flame, which dance and crackle around their feet. Struck or stamped out, the pink flames shatter into coals of blue fire that eat at their sabatons and greaves, and gnaw them away like phosphor. He smashes the flesh-trees as they rear up, barging them with his pauldrons, toppling them with his spear haft, and tearing them with his blade-tip. He learns new names that he is forced to spit out: *K’Chan’tsani’i*.

He is no longer interested in learning how to kill new things. The knowledge he has accumulated sickens him to his core.

The darkness is alive with laughter. Constantin ignores it. Some of the laughter is coming from his own men. He ignores that. Some of those men are already dead. He ignores that too. There is singing, approximate voices wailing approximate words, the melody carried by the very ebb and flow of the swirling gloom. The keening has nine beats in a measure, a strangely limping, additive rhythm that reminds him of old Balkan songs he knows from pre-Unity days. The accumulating names in his mind tell him that it is a Kairic chant forbidden to the air. Another thing for him to ignore.

Diocletian Coros breaks clear and yells out. All neuro-synergy is lost, but they hear his voice. They form up and follow his lead, gripping each other’s pauldron edges to gauge some sense of direction, fending off fire and snapping beak and beating wing. Diocletian cuts a route along a rising shelf of muscle fringed with a hem of gleaming adipose and connective tissue.

The cliff at their backs is strutted with giant ribs and embossed with pearlescent knots of cartilaginous fibre.

A daemon falls upon them. It is by far the largest thing they have encountered in the thirty-nine – now forty – seconds of the fight. Constantin has a sense of it as some vast vulture or corpse-bird, but he can't really see it. Its colossal shoulders are hunched and high, its neck serpentine, its head sunken and snapping a raptor beak longer than a jetbike. Its wings, unseen but suggesting a span so wide it could embrace the galaxy, beat against their straggling line, crushing Meusas and Tiberean, and casting Prefect Kaledas off the lip of the ridge and into the void below. Constantin can't see Kaledas, nor tell how far he has fallen, but he can hear him screaming. The screaming goes on for far too long. Eventually, it becomes part of the nine-beat chant.

The daemon is on them. Its hooked talons, each the size of a Titan engine's ursus claw, bite into the ridge of muscle to find purchase, and it perches like a seabird on a cliff ledge, pecking with its spear-beak. Its wings are everywhere, battering them, filling the air with feather-fibres and the stink of psittacine lice. The jabbing beak impales Laphros, pinning him to the meat wall of the cliff. The blood that sprays out is partly his and partly that of the punctured landscape. Symarcantis manages to spear the daemon in its flank below its left wing, and tries to lever it away. It turns on him, whipping its neck to hurl Laphros' corpse off its beak. Ludovicus severs its throat with his power sword.

The huge bulk of the daemon, its massive pinions still flapping, collapses off the ledge, loose feathers and down tufts tumbling in the air and burning where they settle. Its takes Symarcantis' lance with it, wedged in its side. Only Constantin's tight hold prevents Symarcantis following his lance over the edge.

He hauls the Warden up. Symarcantis grips Constantin's hand for a second, then takes up Laphros' axe, which is lying on the lip where it fell.

Constantin yells for them to advance, but there is no movement. Diocletian shouts back that the path has run out. The shelf of muscle simply tapers into the flesh of the cliff. Another hopeless path, like all the paths they have tried to take. They are lost, and soon their lives will be lost too.

The darkness grows thicker and heavier. This isn't possible, but it happens anyway. Moving, pulsing blackness, pumping with a nine-beat measure,

chokes and strangles them, filling their nostrils, their ears, their throats and guts, their tear ducts. Constantin howls the names he has learned to keep it at bay, but his tongue is swollen and his mouth is full of liquid darkness.

They are forty-three seconds into the fight.

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Valdor and the Custodians close ranks against the darkness…

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5:xix

Life after death

Missiles, slicing low across the matted ooze, strike the end post of the earthworks at Processional Square, but they are merely a distraction. Debris is still raining down as Maximus Thane and the last of his battle-brothers take to the parapet. They get there just a few seconds before the enemy begins its escalade.

The traitors, for the most part berserk World Eaters, but with some Mechanicum elements in support, have counted on the brace of missiles to clear the parapet and keep the defenders ducking while they make their rush. The Excertus companies with Thane, a jumble of weary, clay-caked men and women from a score of different regiments, are still sheltering in the flakboarded cover-boxes and blast trenches, but the armoured Imperial Fists doggedly make the line.

Thane's plate is gouged and scorched, and pieces of it are cracked or missing. His hammer's head is pitted and scored, and the haft is greased with organic waste. When he closes his eyes, he can still see the massacre on the Gilded Walk; the Emperor's finest demolished, row-by-row, by the onrushing legions of the damned, and the daemonswarm that followed

them.

Thane should have died there. By force of will alone, he and the few brothers with him fought clear, broke through a flanking line, and turned back to harry the skirts of an enemy mass they could not face head-on. They have been fighting ever since.

Retreat is not an option. The Praetorian Fists hold the line: that litany is embedded in his soul. But his lord-father Dorn always taught him the error of literal interpretation. Sometimes holding the line can be a worthless act of suicide, where to recompose upon a new line will cost the enemy far more. Every Imperial Fist is prepared to die for his ground, but the veterans are those who can negotiate a higher price for their mortality.

Most of Thane's men are newborn initiates, apart from the veterans Kolquis and Noxar, and the fierce Huscarl Berendol. The initiates have been rushed into the ranks because of the crisis. They are fine men, and Thane sees promise in them all, but they are too fresh, and their minds too stiff with the rubrics of the VII. Thane and his veterans are instructing them by example, showing them that while there is courage in death, there is greater courage in the conviction to reframe and fight better. Flexibility, motion, harrying counter-attacks – such things have finer defensive properties in a hellstorm overrun, against a foe with dismaying numerical superiority. And Thane has learned some tricks himself, observing the White Scars units that fought alongside them. The White Scars, bred for mobile strikes, should have been muzzled and next to useless in a siege war such as this. But they have adapted, and their propensity for movement has even extended to their doctrines, which have kept in motion and adjusted. He has watched them turn their art of war into forms of 'running defence' and 'defence by attack'. Thane's admiration for them is hard for him to express.

The initiates, firebrands all enflamed with the stern fundamentals of their Legion, have sometimes objected to Thane's motile tactics, horrified that he is prepared to give ground or sometimes, as they see it, retreat. He accepts their criticism and commends their nerve to speak out.

'I retreat,' he tells them, 'and thus I am alive still. Alive to teach you this lesson. And alive to do what I will do next.'

'Which is, lord?'

'Kill more of the bastards.'

They see the look in his eyes. Some mutter about 'death before dishonour'.

‘What is more honourable?’ he asks. ‘One dead traitor or a hundred? Death before dishonour is a lofty refrain, but ask yourselves what it means. First of all, ask “How many deaths?”’

‘How many, lord?’

‘It’s *their* deaths we’re talking about. How many can you claim before your honour is upheld? There is more dishonour in keeping your mind and place so rigid that you achieve but a fraction of the tally that might have been.’

His hammer pulverises the rising skull of a World Eater. Head pulped and slack, and now set backwards upon its broken neck, the World Eater topples off the parapet. It is just the first. The roaring enemy mass is piling the earthwork line like a snowdrift. *Eaters*. Thane thinks of them just as Eaters now, and refuses to respect them with their full name. They are vermin beasts, devourers of carrion, necrovores. They do not deserve Astartesian courtesy.

Thane’s hammer does not falter. Thane does not hesitate. To his left, Berendol swings his greatsword with a measured stroke that seems leisurely, but actually speaks to an acute understanding of momentum, weight-balance and combat economy. Beyond the Huscarl, Kolquis counterpoints strokes of his chainblade with shots from his bolt pistol, creating a staggered arrhythmia of defence actions that the rising Eaters cannot predict.

To Thane’s right, two of the initiates, Molwae and Demeny, ‘prentice-brothers’ as Berendol disparagingly calls them all, are hacking like threshers on a mill floor. Their strokes are good, their fevered energy enough to make Thane and the two veterans seem languid. They are landing two or even three blows for every one of Thane’s.

But every two or three are hitting the same stricken targets.

Thane doesn’t know if it’s manic desperation – for who of them, even veterans, have not felt a touch of that on this day of days? – or a youthful display of pride to make a good showing at his side and not let him down. He *does* know that the final hours of Terra’s fall are not a teaching moment. But when else will it matter if not now?

Without breaking his flow, without turning to them, he calls their names on the intervox.

‘Slow your rates,’ he says. ‘Judge your strikes. One good blow, not three

hasty ones. Each stroke is a kill-stroke. They can only die once.’

Molwae and Demeny adjust in an instant, without a question or a side look. They become considered, raising accuracy above speed. Their kill rates do not drop. They follow his model as a paragon of the Astartesian principles.

He could not ask for more.

From down the fighting line, Noxar yells a warning, but Thane only hears half of it before the noise of the threat drowns it out. Blinding jets of flame hose up the embankment line, engulfing sections of the swarming Eaters, and pluming across the bulwark. Two Imperial Fists, initiates both, plunge off the parapet into the trench behind, sheeting trails of flame like comets.

The storm-engines of the Traitor Mechanicum, barging forward through the crush of Eaters, have unleashed their heavy flamers, and the bulk meltas mounted like searchlights on their forward rails. No one uses heat-war or fire-war with allies forward of their position. The Mechanicum has dispensed with this particular courtesy of combat. Perhaps the field alliance of Mechanicum and Eaters is tenuous at best. Perhaps the Martian wretches want to be titular victors of this engagement and cheat the feral sons of Nuceria of their triumph. Perhaps they do not care.

Perhaps, thinks Thane for one chilling second, the *World Eaters* do not care.

There is no time to consider the Eaters’ willingness for self-sacrifice in the name of victory. Stones and shield-plates melt like water. The blow-torch ferocity of the flame-mounts, built to ignite Titan engines, razes the parapet.

Burning death rises in his face, bright enough to burn away the whole world.

Thane’s last thought is of his beloved primarch lord. He is going to die, never knowing if he has honoured Rogal Dorn or failed him.

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5:xx

Unyielding

One year, it tries a new voice. It says: *There is shadow under this red rock (come in under the shadow of this red rock), and I will show you something different from either, your shadow at morning striding behind you, or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; I will show you fear in a handful of dust.*

He hears it quite distinctly. He doesn't know what it means, though the wall is like a red rock, and there is a cool shadow beneath it where he chooses to sit, and everywhere here is dust. He thinks he knows the voice too. It sounds like a warrior he once knew, whose armour bore no markings. His own armour has no markings either, because the wind and sand have worn them off. Perhaps the warrior was lost in the desert too? He can't remember the warrior's name. It was too long ago, and besides, he's fairly sure it is just the red doing different voices.

Still, the little, bleached memory of the warrior reminds him of a little faded patch of the past he thought he had lost in the dust. He starts scraping a new plan out on the wall.

'I am Rogal Dorn, unyielding,' he says.

Just give up. Just say it. Just say it. Who is the blood for?

The whispers are distracting. After a few more years, he decides to talk while he works, to blot them out. The red doesn't like that either.

'Two millennia before the start of the first modern era on Terra, it was written in the Sumari epic lyric, called by some the *Record of Gigamech*, that two warriors debated whether or not to execute a captured enemy–'

Behind the wall, the red hisses in annoyance. *This* again.

'They eventually elect to kill him. This brings down on them the opprobrium of what, at that period, were considered gods. There were no gods. But in this case, "gods" are a metaphor for societal outrage. The poem, some thirty thousand years old, is the earliest human record of ethics in warfare. The idea of *just* and *unjust killing*. It is the first application of morality to warfare.'

The red growls its displeasure.

He smiles, and adds, 'Mankind realised, even then, that blood was never just for blood.'

Another growl.

He carries on working, scratching, planning. He is not really talking to the red, because you cannot really hold a conversation with it, not any conversation he is prepared to have. But there is no one else here besides him and the red. He talks to drown out its whispers, so he can concentrate. It is simply a bonus that what he says annoys it.

'Some… and we can only estimate… but some one-and-a-half-thousand years later, the cultures of archaic Eleniki developed the first rules of war. They were not binding, and had no legality, but they were agreed, and abided by, at a social level.'

These are the things he remembers. He learned them, long ago. Someone taught him, when he was young. His father, perhaps? He thinks he had a father. He recites the history of warfare ethics as a mantra, a focus for his rusting mind, a wall to block out the whispers. A calculated annoyance.

He keeps talking to himself. It's odd at first, for no one has really spoken for almost a century except the whispers. The sound of his own voice surprises him. He had almost forgotten how to speak.

Give up. Give in. Say it. Say who the blood is for–

'Circa three hundred, M1, in the period known as the Martial States, in the Eastern Eurasian expanse, the concept of *yi bang* was devised to regulate

the application of war. This formalised the justification for killing, making it the supreme method of judicial punishment. It could be used only by the ruling elite. Just kings, lords, emperors. Blood was not for anyone else.'

Behind the wall, the red snarls.

'This is the convention later known as *jus ad bellum*.'

Years pass. Plans are scratched, scrapped, and new versions added. Frustrated by his dry-voiced lectures and the scritch of his blade, the red stops whispering. Sounds come, instead. Noises on the other side of the wall. Distant murmurs of battle and destruction.

He stops and listens. He presses his ear to the wall to hear better. The sounds are close, just on the other side. They are so tempting. But he can't climb the walls, because the walls are slightly too high, and he knows that if he treks up to the top of the highest dune, he still won't quite be able to see over. He wants to. He wants to see. He longs to let go. To give up. To wade out into the blood and stop thinking.

But the only way to get out, the only way to reach the other side, is to give in and say the thing the red wants him to say.

'I am Rogal Dorn,' he says instead.

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Our days of glory ended

Under the command of Azkaellon of the Sanguinary Guard, a significant force of Blood Angels, Imperial Fists and White Scars moves up to occupy Hasgard. By the time they arrive, Rann and his teams have swept the bunker system again, carried out the enemy dead, and dumped them in the acidic pool of a giant shell hole west of the fortification.

They now have a salient from which to strike at the main enemy lines pushing towards the Delphic Battlement. Comms are still patchy over any kind of distance, so Namahi sends two White Scars on jetbikes to carry the news to Archamus, and coordinate action between the main loyalist force on the Delphic approaches and Rann's little thorn to the side. Rann reckons they can hold the scabby shell of Hasgard for a day, longer if Archamus can find them some armour support or an operational engine. White Scars pathfinders, on foot and bike, scout the routes between Fratery, Hasgard and the Viaduct, watching for enemy movement. It will come, soon enough, and it will be legion.

In the ragged bunkers, they keep watch and prep. Munitions are painfully low. They find a cache or two of bolt-rounds and other kinetics, marked

with the Imperialis crest, in the bunkerwork stores, left behind by the previous defenders, but no one wants to scavenge munitions from the traitor dead. Their hard rounds and projectiles seem cursed to the touch, as tainted as the beasts who loaded them.

'Our days of glory ended at the Gate,' Azkaellon tells Rann, as they sit together on the roof emplacement of one of the bunkers, watching the field for movement. The Sanguinary Guard, like all the Blood Angels, calls it 'the Gate' as though there are no others. Perhaps there aren't to them. They mean the last, immortal struggle of the Brightest One against Angron and the foul Bane of the Ninth, a feat of arms unlikely to be matched, the deed that locked the final fortress.

But Sanguinius has left the field. He, and Dorn, and Valdor, and the Emperor, gone to some last clash, some finitude, that the likes of Rann will probably never know about. The fate of the Palace has been left in the hands of their orphaned Astartes sons.

'All our glory ended there,' Azkaellon says. His sadness seems at odds with his painful beauty. 'My Bright Lord was obliged to close the Gate. There was no choice. Angron's bastards were upon us in uncountable numbers. It must have been a terrible decision to make. But he did the right thing, because he is strong. The Sanctum had to be protected. It had to be sealed. He got as many sons inside as he could.'

'Not you?' Rann asks.

'There was so little time,' says Azkaellon.

'So you were left outside?'

The Sanguinary Guard shakes his head, sorry that he gave the wrong impression.

'Oh no, Fafnir,' he says. 'I chose to stay. We all did. Me, and the Bringer of Sorrow, and Rinas Dol, Gaellon, all the others. Those that were closest to the Gate went in. The rest of us were further out. Our retreat would have delayed things and risked…'

He trails off for a moment.

'So we chose to stay,' he says quietly. 'The World Eaters were on us in droves. We chose to stay, and sent our decision to the Bright Lord. *Close the Gate*. We stood our ground, and we held it, so that my lord and the others could get inside. It had to be done. They had to be held back. They would have choked the Gate otherwise.'

‘How did you survive?’ Rann asks.

Azkaellon looks at him, an amused frown that pretends his martial prowess has been insulted.

‘No, *how*?’ asks Rann. ‘You made an incredible sacrifice. The conditions you describe–’

‘We fought,’ says Azkaellon.

‘I don’t doubt it, sir,’ says Rann. ‘But how did you live?’

Azkaellon shrugs.

‘I honestly don’t know,’ he says. ‘We fought. Throne, like a frenzy. Just taking as many of them with us as we could. It seemed to last for hours where I was expecting just seconds of life remaining. Then… then there was a break. A slackening. Their assault eased. I suppose their spirit was broken because they had watched their lord die. Or perhaps because the Gate was shut and they knew it was futile. There was a moment’s easing, so we took it. We fought clear, away from the wall, out into the wastes of the Palatine…’

He looks at Rann.

‘We found cover, eventually, in a ruined bastion. Regrouped. Joined your lord Archamus’ divisions soon after. We’ve been fighting ever since.’

He pauses.

‘Strangest thing,’ he reflects. ‘The ruin we sheltered in. It can’t have been far from the Gate, because we didn’t break far. The World Eaters were like an ocean around us. But I swear, it was Avalon Bastion.’

‘That’s a long way from the Gate,’ says Rann.

‘I know. The confusion of war, I suppose. We were moving fast. Desperation, I confess. There didn’t seem to be any chance of cover. Then, suddenly, it was there.’

He sighs.

‘So I am left out here to watch over our brothers as night falls. There is no glory left, Fafnir, no valour, no burnished prize to be pursued. Just duty and endeavour, the brutal mechanics of survival. If we prevail, against these odds, then it will be the most significant victory of our lifetimes. But it will not be one to savour or celebrate. The warped blight of treason has broken us so utterly, this will be a time best forgotten.’

‘By us?’

‘By history. This war is a stain upon our culture, and even the winning of it

will be sullied by the shame of it ever happening.’

‘You sound resentful,’ says Rann.

‘Of what, brother?’

‘That you were left behind.’

Azkaellon smiles a thin smile. ‘Not for a moment,’ he says. ‘My father expects this of me. He expects me to fly this path alone, in his stead, and hold the host together. I am his proxy, and there is no greater duty. My brothers of the Sanguinary Guard soar with him, at his side, to protect his life. They do not need me in order to excel.’

‘Then perhaps resentful was the wrong word. You seem cold. I have seen it in the other Blood Angels out here. I have seen it in Zephon. It is not a demeanour I associate with my brightest brothers.’

Azkaellon nods. ‘True enough. The fire of our glory is dimmed and…’

‘And?’

‘I feel a weight upon me,’ the Blood Angel confesses quietly. ‘I know the others feel it too. Zephon most certainly. It’s more than the bleak misery that afflicts us all. It’s like a terrible dream I am yet to have, or a bleak nightmare that, on waking, I cannot quite recall. It presses upon us, Fafnir. Ah, you must think me a fool.’

‘Never that,’ says Rann. ‘This war has taken everything from us, including our self-respect. I am sorry to see the fire of the Blood Angels burn so low.’

‘It gutters low, but it is not out, brother,’ says Azkaellon. ‘We shield it from the wind so it might survive. And if it survives… if we survive… then after this, perhaps, it will blaze bright again and our legacy will live on. I fight through these gruelling, inglorious hours in the hope that one day we will be free to be glorious once more.’

The Sanguinary Guard glances at Rann, his face solemn.

‘But I think,’ he says, ‘all the glory my Legion will accrue through its deeds has already been achieved. Whatever happens now, if there are any stories to tell in any kind of hereafter, Sanguinius at the Gate is part of our legend, perhaps the greatest part. Our primarch will never perform a deed more noble. Our days of glory ended at the Gate.’

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5:xxii

The last glory

They are the elite warriors of the Lupercal, three full companies of the Sons of Horus, held in reserve on the *Vengeful Spirit* as a personal bodyguard for the Warmaster. They are supported by a mass of Word Bearers, less regimented than the Horusian elite, but manic with bloodlust and idolatrous zeal, in number perhaps another five companies, backed by brigades of Traitor Excertus from the Merudin 20th Tactical Cadre and the infamous, hand-picked Hort Lupercali. With a force of this size and veteran prowess, the Warmaster could bring compliance to an entire world.

With a force of this quality, the Warmaster *has* brought compliance to entire worlds.

But they reel. They reel and they buckle, and they are driven back.

Sanguinius, with just a single company at his heels, is tearing into them.

There is no range. It is brutal close killing, packed body-to-body, the mayhem of mass melee, where to kill is to be showered in your victim’s blood. The Great Atrium is vast, a huge temple of honour that crowns the magnitude of the Main Spinal, where once visitors were greeted with great ceremony before admission to the command decks, but it is packed to

capacity, and the chosen ceremony is a blood rite.

The rival forces lock and mesh, Blood Angels and Lupercalian Sons. There is no movement or leeway. They hold their places or die. They kill where they stand or die where they stand. They lock and hold. They push or resist. Men perish, held upright by the density of men around them. The deck is awash, and rubbled with corpses. The atrium's banners burn. Portions of gilded ceiling collapse, showering those below. The white ouslite walls are cracked and pocked with ten thousand smoking holes, like the cratered surface of a blighted moon. There is no give. There can be no breaking, no release, for if either side breaks, the day is done. If the Sons of Horus give way, they will be overrun and massacred, and the way will be clear to Lupercal himself: to Lupercal, the command bridge, and the seizure of the *Vengeful Spirit*. The flagship will be taken, the cruel war over, and the loyalist cause triumphant.

If the Blood Angels, furious as the surface of the sun but wildly outnumbered, break now, then there will be no second chance. They will die, to a man, butchered in retreat, and the cause will be lost beyond any redemption. Terra will be lost. The Golden Throne. The Imperium.

It is do or die. It is do *and* die. It is here and now, or never. The Great Atrium is the *Spirit*'s throat, the jugular. Cut it, and the flagship falls, a prize trophy to be gutted and skinned, and its head set on display.

The Sons of Horus will not falter. They cannot. They are the children of Horus Lupercal, the fury of the Warmaster personified, brimful of his wrath and his rage, imbued with his power, indomitable and loyal to the last. The thought of breaking does not enter their minds. Defeat has no place in their battle lexicon as a concept or even a word. This assault, for all its vehemence, is just a single company, the defiance of the already defeated.

The Blood Angels will not falter. They will not. They are the last hope of salvation, the only loyalist formation to ever get this close to arresting the inevitable plunge of history into infamy. And they will not stop because they are the sons of Sanguinius, and they will follow him forever, and the Bright Angel will never stop.

He simply will not. He simply *does* not.

Of all the lives in that great and burning hall, his is the one that matters. Despite their implacable ferocity and luminous courage, the Blood Angels are outnumbered eight to one. If great Dorn, with his tactical genius, had

drawn up a plan assessment, the Blood Angels would have lost before the ink of his signifying mark was dry. They should not achieve this. They cannot. It is non-viable. It is strategically unwinnable, on paper and in life.

Except for him.

Sanguinius is the variable. He is the disproportionate factor that overturns even the most carefully inspected projections, and invalidates the most impregnable logic. He is the outlier that revokes any tactical plan, which was why, in his wisdom, Dorn never factored him into any.

It is not just Sanguinius' physical power, which is beyond doubt. It is his mind. The purity of his focus and the almost sacred perfection of his devotion. And it is his presence; the aspect of him, like some manifest projection of the Emperor's light. The Sons of Horus he carves through shield their eyes, despite the efficient function of their visors. Some begin to smoke and combust before he reaches them. Some die without him even touching them. He rives a crimson chine through the armoured walls of the foe for his sons to follow.

Through it all, he ignores the pain.

He has taken a thousand tiny wounds, gashes, tears and scratches, and he feels none of them. The blood streaming from his golden form is mostly not his own. But the wound in his flank aches in his soul. It gnaws into his gut, into his groin, and up through his ribs and lungs. He can taste blood in his throat, and that blood is sour and spoiled. When he opens his mouth to yell his brother's name, his teeth are flecked red. There is a septic simmer in his bloodstream, and he can smell the breeding decay inside himself. He hacks *Encarmine* sidelong, dissevering heads and limbs, and feels the unhealed wound pull open as he reaches out. He rams *Telesto* through a pair of flailing bodies, lifting them off the deck as they disintegrate, and feels the hot wash of the wound leaking under his placket. He crops and hews his path into the guts of the enemy mass, and feels the weeping sting in his own belly.

He ignores it, but it will not be ignored.

He wonders, for a moment, *Has Horus killed me? Was Angron just the weapon? Is* that *how prophecy will make its vicious sense?*

He casts the thought away. He has no use for it, and no time for it. He has one life, and though it might be reaching its end, he has one purpose to fulfil, or that whole life will have been worthless. He will prevail, for there

is no one else to prevail in his place.

A war-axe notches his left arm. He smashes the wielder aside with such force, the attacker's body brings down other Sons of Horus. A chainsword howls close at his right. He shears the whining blade in two, then carves blazing *Encarmine* down through the chainsword's owner. Bisected like an anatomical diagram, another Son slams into the deck. Four more die in the Great Angel's path. Three others tear at him, and try to grip him and bring him over, clinging to his hips and thighs. He kicks them aside, pulling them off him, feeling the wound grind and drool as he moves.

A few clear metres of deck ahead. He pushes on, growling away his hurt. A Word Bearer rushes him, but falls short, and drops to his knees, filthy smoke pouring out of his visor. Another two Sons of Horus try to bracket him, coming from left and right. Sanguinius swings at full extension, and passes the tip of *Encarmine* through the throat of the one on the right, making him buckle. As the traitor falls, trying to hold the blood and severed windpipe inside his neck with both hands, Sanguinius rotates, and lets his body weight lead the sword clean through the torso of the other.

Another step. All is mayhem. From nowhere, a bolt-round hits him square in the cuirass. The blast lifts him and hurls him backwards. He finds himself dazed and entangled in a mob of the roaring foe, a dozen or more, who grasp and tear at him, almost lifting him prostrate above them like a prize as they try to claw the immortal weapons from his hands and rip the limbs from his body. He thrashes to regain his footing. He kicks out, and a helm crumples. He flails *Encarmine* blindly and beheads a roaring Son. Gauntlets scrabble and wrench at him. Some rip bloodstones from their settings. One shreds gilded laurels from his scorched cuirass. Another buckles his left vambrace. More haul at his hair and pin his wings.

One rakes across his abdomen and compresses the wound.

Pain blinds him. Death raises its cowl to show him its face.

Darkness eats him.

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Invaded

Darkness, then a voice. Nassir Amit opens his eyes.

Praetor-Captain Honfler has finally reappeared.

‘Attend me,’ the praetor orders as he approaches the denial companies waiting on the staging level.

Amit had allowed himself to settle into a brief catalepsean fugue, partly to preserve his focus, but mostly to shut out the constant grumbling of the Space Wolf, Sartak.

His mind is not rested. Induced circadian fugues are usually dreamless. Amit’s had been clotted with visions of his gene-sire. In them, his Bright Lord had been lost in total darkness. There had been doors, doors and gateways, revealed by his primarch’s groping fingers, but each one was treacherous, and none of them led anywhere. Not anywhere new, at least, not anywhere different. Most led his lord back to where he had started, while a few kept taking him to a vault where silent stone caskets waited in candlelight.

One door, it seemed, brought his lord directly into Amit’s dream. Each time that happened, the Great Angel would look at Amit with the forlorn

eyes of a trapped animal, then turn to the darkness to try another door. There was so much pain in the dream, Amit can almost taste blood in his mouth.

‘Attend me now,’ Honfler commands. He is flanked by his line officer deputies, Aerim Lur of the Raven Guard, the Imperial Fists Vexillary Tamos Roch, and N’nkono Emba of the Salamanders Pyre Guard. The waiting companies stir. Sartak growls something that sounds like ‘at last’. Amit tries to clear his mind. The ghost of his great lord lingers. Just a dream, he tells himself, born of his concerns for the Lord of Baal. Yet the enemy has been trying to worm its way in for seven months. A wall might keep it out, a firmly locked gate, but what if the enemy’s siegecraft is so sophisticated it can invade their *dreams* to undermine them?

He forces himself to focus on Honfler. This is the order, after all, the one none of them wanted to hear. Amit tells himself he ought to be listening when the Imperium’s death-notice is proclaimed.

‘The War Court has instructed reserve deployment,’ Honfler announces, taking a data-slate from Aerim Lur. ‘The following units will–’

He stops, mid-sentence. Sartak is already ambling towards the access steps of the fighting platforms, casually gesturing for his company to follow him.

‘Where are you going, Wolf?’ Lur calls out.

‘To war,’ Sartak replies, looking back. ‘You stay here talking, by all means.’

Lur and Roch both take a step forward.

‘Resume your place, Sartak of Fenris,’ Honfler says.

‘My place is on that wall,’ Sartak replies.

‘Your place is where the War Court tells you to be,’ says Lur.

‘Hell with them,’ Sartak replies, baring his teeth. ‘Their piss-poor decisions and craven tactics have steered us to this bloody ending. I should have been on that wall hours ago. I’ll show you how the Rout–’

‘*Get back in line, you whining, insolent dog*.’

There is silence for a moment. Amit realises everyone is looking at him. He had spoken without thinking, as if seized by some sudden rage. He has no idea where that fury came from, or where it went, just as swiftly.

‘Apologies, praetor,’ he says to Honfler.

Sartak sniffs, spits, then slowly walks back to his place at the head of Denial 340. He stares at Amit every step of the way.

‘To continue,’ says Honfler, his unamused eyes on both of them, ‘your denial companies will be deployed into the Sanctum, not to the wall. You will form preparatory defensive lines.’

‘Inside the Sanctum?’ Hemheda asks. Then adds, ‘Praetor.’

‘Inside the Sanctum, Hemheda Khan,’ Honfler replies. ‘The voids are beginning to fail. If there’s a cascade collapse, the Delphic may become unviable very quickly. I will not have assets stuck up here on the platforms when the enemy is breaching at ground level.’

‘We need a new wall standing ready when the Delphic gives way,’ says Roch. ‘That’s you.’

‘Might as well stand there as here,’ mutters Sartak, ‘if standing is all we get to do. Eh, Blood Angel?’

‘Damned when we do, Wolf,’ Amit replies. His pulse is racing. Not quite the end, then. Not yet. Another desperate convolution of strategy by Dorn’s War Court to stave off the inevitable. Denial indeed.

Aerim Lur begins to announce dispersal. Six of the reserve companies will move to the Kylon Processional under his command. Another four, including Sartak’s, will go with Honfler to the Martian Approaches. Emba will take five to the Western Mass Passageway. Amit’s company, along with Hemheda’s, will be two of the five Vexillary Roch leads to the Marnix Confluence. Amit presumes every staging level around the Delphic is being similarly denuded to stock the Inner Sanctum with manpower, and surround the approaches to the Throne Room.

‘Make ready!’ Honfler shouts.

They *are* ready. Ready to move at once. The twenty denial companies begin to file onto the Delphic’s armoured staircases to begin their descent. They march, all of them, with perfect drill discipline. Amit waits for Denial 963’s turn to follow, listening to the rhythmic tramp of footsteps echoing from the stairs below.

‘Hold them,’ he says to his sergeant, Lamirus. ‘If I’m delayed, move our company off and I’ll join you shortly.’

‘Where are you going?’ Lamirus asks.

Amit walks back along the line to the head of Denial 340. Sartak has his back to him, addressing his men, criticising Praetorian Tactical in lavishly scatological terms. He doesn’t hear Amit coming. But he sees the look on the faces of the Salamanders and Iron Hands in his unit. He turns.

They stare at each other for a moment.

‘I insulted you, brother,’ says Amit.

Sartak frowns. ‘You called me a whining, insolent dog,’ he rumbles.

‘Yes,’ says Amit. ‘I spoke out of turn.’

Sartak doesn’t reply.

‘I… ask for your pardon,’ says Amit.

‘Why?’

‘Because we won’t meet again,’ says Amit.

Sartak sniffs. He shrugs slightly, and turns to face his men. Amit starts to walk back to the head of his unit.

‘Blood Angel?’

Amit looks over his shoulder. Sartak is staring at him.

‘Did you say what you were thinking?’ Sartak asks.

‘Yes,’ Amit replies.

‘Good. No other bastard in this place seems to. I won’t give you my pardon. I don’t do pardon. I’ll give you some advice.’

‘Do you have to?’ asks Amit.

‘Looks like it’s happening,’ says Sartak.

‘Very well.’

‘When you close with the traitor scum, Blood Angel, face to face, make sure your bite is worse than your bloody bark.’

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5:xxiv

The Retreat

The tower, known also as the Sigillite’s Retreat, is a slender and lonely structure standing on a plasteel promontory above the trench. Stone-built, dirt-caked and slightly irregular, like an arthritic finger, it seems a relic from another age, some architectural curio that has been allowed to linger, unmolested, while the rest of the magnificent Sanctum was raised around it and, ultimately, above it, eclipsing it in altitude, proportion and grandeur.

Amon leads them across the promontory to the portico and begins to deactivate the security codes. The door at the base of the tower is heavy, blast-proof and sealed, and a much later addition to the building’s mouldering stonework.

‘Can’t you let us in?’ Andromeda asks Xanthus.

‘I was only ever admitted at the Regent’s invitation,’ Xanthus replies, ‘and then seldom. It requires Custodes clearance if the Sigillite is not present.’

Andromeda glances at Amon. It seems to be taking the Custodian a long time to unlock the entry. The hololithic door-plate keeps flashing up denial runes, requiring Amon to enter increasingly more advanced permission codes, a formidably high level of securement for such an apparently modest

and insignificant building.

Fo gazes up at the ragged, shabby tower. ‘I expected his regal highness Malcador to inhabit something more impressive,’ he remarks.

‘He doesn’t live here,’ says Xanthus. *He doesn’t live anywhere at all now*, he thinks. ‘It’s just a phrontistery. A place of contemplation, and study.’

‘A phrontistery,’ Fo echoes, amused by the pomposity of the word. ‘It looks like it’s about to fall down.’

‘It won’t fall down,’ says Xanthus. ‘It has stood for a long time. A very long time.’

‘I suppose,’ says Fo. He looks far from impressed. ‘A worn but robust old relic from another age.’ (I know how that feels). ‘I’m just saying, it looks a little frail.’

‘So does the Sigillite,’ says Xanthus. ‘And yet he rules the Realm of Man as Regent.’

The little fleshcrafter looks at him with cold eyes.

‘I ruled a great realm once, too,’ he says. ‘Strange how things change.’

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5:xxv

Darkness in their beauty

Something has changed. Rann cannot shake the feeling. It's more than just the great doom sinking down upon them all. Everyone feels that. But the Blood Angels seem especially fatalistic. Could the glorious fighting spirit of the IX Legion really have gone out prematurely, snuffed out by the draught of a gate slamming shut? Surely they won't falter now? Rann cannot imagine facing Terra's final battle without them at his side.

But there's something about Azkaellon's tone, and the reticence he has seen in Zephon, that makes him suspect that the Blood Angels have withdrawn into some atavistic mindset as though crippled by mourning already. What presentiment of fate have they felt that he has not?

Perhaps, in the absence of their primarch lord, this is how the IX prepares itself. Not by predicting the worst and offering their lives in the hope of preventing it, as Rann and the Imperial Fists were taught, but by accepting the worst and committing their lives as though they are avenging it. It was said that, in the early days, they were a vengeful and almost savage host, an aspect that altered and civilised over the years of the crusade until it was all but hidden by the grace they had acquired. Rann has always felt this about

his brothers, the Angels of the IX. They are the most noble and wondrous of the Legions, but there is a revenant darkness in their beauty. He is glad he will never get to see it: it is a darkness only ever faced by their foes.

Rann decides to press it no further. Besides, Zephon has just climbed into the emplacement to join them.

‘Namahi’s riders have returned,’ he says. ‘Lord Archamus is aware of our disposition. He sends you this.’

Rann takes the wafer. It is a slip of paper, one of the Prefectus’ purity tags, on which Archamus has written in his own hand. The Lord Militant Terra evidently no longer places any trust in the durability of slates or technology.

He reads it. It says what Rann expects it to say: Archamus’ brigades on the Delphic approaches are under heavy and constant assault from vast divisions of the Traitor Legions: World Eaters, Death Guard and the Warmaster’s bastard Sons. Archamus anticipates a second, flanking front within the hour, and Hasgard will be in its path. He charges Rann to harry and slow that second front as best he can. Should it fail to appear, Archamus writes he will send word and have Rann launch a counter-strike into the ribs of the enemy’s main strength. He thinks this second option unlikely, and the first more probable. He commends Rann’s fortune, expresses his confidence that Rann will serve without fault, and signs the message ‘Archamus, Second of that Name.’

It is exactly what Rann expected, except for one detail. The missive is addressed to ‘Fafnir.’ Not *My brother*, or *Lord Rann*, or *Lord Seneschal*. Just *Fafnir*. In these last hours, despite the conventions of protocol, Archamus wished to communicate his respect and love for his brother by using his forename. It tells Rann that Archamus does not anticipate them meeting again.

He looks away.

‘Brother?’ asks Azkaellon.

Rann clears his throat. He tells the Blood Angels the content of the message, and their framing orders. They nod. It is as they expected.

‘Leod Baldwin was asking for you,’ says Zephon.

‘I’ll go to him,’ says Rann. ‘Take the watch.’

‘Of course,’ says Azkaellon.

‘If they come, make your voices loud,’ Rann says. ‘Do not save them all for yourselves.’

Azkaellon laughs. Zephon nods curtly, his scarred lips forming a shape that looks less like a small smile and more like a predator baring its teeth in a snarl.

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Extraction

Abaddon snarls the order to instruct launch as soon as his companies are secure aboard the Stormbirds. There’s a fire in him, a terrible urgency, and it troubles his men as much as his ominous decision to extract from the front line. Clamped in his seat, he feels the airframe shudder, and hears the rising shriek of the engines as they climb to power–

Then nothing. The vibrations cease and the engine-howl subsides. Lift failure. He suspects a mechanical fault, a technical launch-abort. The Stormbirds have been punished hard these last few weeks, with meagre ground crew provision on the surface fields. And the atmosphere is like soup, a petrochemical filth of grit and dust and scouring smoke. What is it? A clogged intake? Turbine abrasion? A seized fuel line?

He feels his temper and tension rise, soaring as though to mock his grounded transport. He opens intervox to the cockpit, but only static replies.

He unclasps his arrestor harness and releases the seat-clamp. His equerry Ulnok starts to unclamp too.

‘Stay,’ Abaddon growls to him. ‘Everyone stays flight-ready.’

He moves down the narrow passageway in the red gloom, head bowed to

avoid the overhead gear. The warriors of First Company stay in their clamps. No one stirs, but he can taste their unease. Pulling out of the line was bad enough, but now a lift-fail? He's losing their trust. He knows it.

What if it's not a mechanical fault? Sacristy Field, their extraction point, was hardly ideal. Close to the ruined zone of Hasgard Gate, it was already being shelled when their Stormbirds came in. What if the flight crew has rejected the lift as unviable? Transports are at their most vulnerable at the point of lift, exposed to surface-to-air weapons. Maybe the pilots have refused to lift into an increasingly hostile airspace? What if the enemy is already at the edge of the field, and his six companies are now caged in their transports–

Abaddon cranks open the cockpit hatch.

'Explain,' is all he says. There is venom in the word. One protest, one citation of an operational objection to launch, and he'll execute them and fly the damn thing himself.

'First Captain, I cannot,' the pilot replies. His hands are off the flight controls. Abaddon can see that the Stormbird's systems are down-powered.

'The hell are you playing at?' Abaddon asks. 'When I instruct lift, I expect you to lift. Immediate return to the flagship is a priority–'

'At your command, First Captain,' says the pilot. 'And I have obeyed.'

He glances at his co-pilot. Abaddon can't see their expressions behind the glare-visors of the flight gear, but he can smell the stink of fear, the–

Incredulity.

Abaddon leans down and peers through the tinted cockpit ports over their shoulders.

'Explain,' he says, but all the venom has gone now.

'I cannot, First Captain.'

'We didn't move.'

'We had barely raised to full launch power, First Captain.'

'Lower the ramp,' says Abaddon. 'Open the hatch.'

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Infiltration

The hatch finally opens, then another. With a series of scraping, metallic squeals, four interlocked layers of adamantine unlock and peel back, and internal shielding fizzles off. The Sigillite's Retreat is fortified like a vault. Stale air breathes out of the unlit doorway, a mix of damp stone and book-must. No one has been here for days, or even weeks.

Amon leads them into the darkness. Pencil-thin beams scan them as they pass through the thick doorway, recording their bio-patterns in the entry log. There is a muffled thump as processors begin to circulate and refresh the air. Ahead of them, lighting systems alerted by movement begin to blink on.

Inside, it is more capacious than the exterior suggested. The stone walls are lined with reinforcing struts of plasteel and what looks to Fo like psycurium. Stone steps spiral upward, level by level, as in the drum turret of some donjon. More lights come on: electro-flambeaux strung from the ceiling of each level, and individual glow-globes suspended around the winding stair like bright and steadfast stars to guide the way.

They go up. The second floor is lined, floor to ceiling, with bookcases, shaped to fit the curving walls. The third floor is the same, book-lined, but

the stairs suddenly go the other way around the chamber.

‘An unusual design,’ remarks Fo. He hurries upwards, his feet not sore at all now, apparently.

Amon pauses. He is sure that the winding stairs in the Retreat had always been a counter-clockwise spiral from top to bottom.

‘This clock has stopped!’ Fo calls out from above.

On the fourth floor, Xanthus and Andromeda are watching Fo as he takes stock of the place. There are many more books, cased around the walls, and many objects and trinkets besides, set out for display: timepieces and antique scientific instruments, specimens preserved in rheumy jars, an anatomist’s ecorche, the figurines of cancelled gods and redacted messiahs, a cross-sectioned nautilus shell, decks of cards and bowls of gaming pieces, wax discs and seals, the delicate skeleton of a small feline mounted on a stand.

‘I expected more,’ says Fo.

‘There is much more,’ says Xanthus. ‘Many more floors. The lower levels are primarily miscellanea. But works relating to the Sigillite’s primary areas of study, many in his own hand, are on the floors above.’

‘Let’s hope I find what I need,’ Fo says sullenly (though, privately, I am finding this most engaging. The Sigillite’s own manuscripts and notes?). He begins to walk up the next flight of steps, which, Amon notices, runs counter-clockwise on this floor.

‘So many damn stairs,’ Fo complains. ‘I’m not young any more.’ He stops, goes back down a few steps, and points to something he has noticed tucked in against the bookcases. ‘Neither was he,’ he says.

It is a portable medicae unit of some sophistication, upright and set on small wheels for portability. It has an oxygen tank and mask, monitors for vital signs, a compact pharm locker, and a small defibrillator device. It has been slid out of the way, a shawl half draped across it, but it is clearly intended to be within easy reach.

‘No,’ says Xanthus. ‘His health was often poor.’

Fo nods. ‘Age gets to us all,’ he says. ‘Well, except Him, I imagine. Unless you know how to do something about it.’

‘The Sigillite did,’ replies Xanthus, irritated. ‘In his laboratorium, he had many devices–’

‘Laboratorium?’ asks Fo. He tries to make it sound casual, but he can’t

disguise the glint of interest in his eyes.

‘Yes. He worked on many processes that–’

‘And where is it?’ Fo asks, hurrying on up the stairs.

Amon follows him quickly. At the top of the next flight, there is another heavy blast hatch.

‘Open it, Amon,’ says Fo.

Amon looks back at Xanthus and Andromeda on the steps behind him.

‘We need to give him facilities to work in,’ says Xanthus.

‘Not without supervision,’ Amon replies.

‘Of course not,’ Andromeda replies.

‘I do not like this,’ says Amon.

‘None of us like it,’ says Fo quietly. ‘But there’s a war, Custodian. You want that stopped, don’t you? My weapon might be the only chance to do that. So, right now, we are in this together.’

Amon looks at the old man. Fo recoils slightly. (I try to keep my composure, but these Custodes are dreadful creatures, and to be stared at *directly* by one…) He expects a list of prohibitions and restrictions, but the look alone is enough. Amon will kill him for the slightest indiscretion.

Amon enters a series of codes. As before, it takes the highest level of encrypted permission to disarm the concealed auto-defences and unlock the area. The blast hatch grinds open, and lighting arrays wake up.

Fo stares in through the doorway. The next floor is a workshop. It is panelled, floor, walls and ceiling, in stainless steel, and there are air-scrubbers built into the walls. On the long metal work benches, curved to fit the chamber, stand racks of surgical tools, networked cogitator units, centrifuges, gene-spinners and micro-implantation devices, cellular scanners, splicers and genome samplers. Cryo-stabilised cabinets hum beneath the benches.

‘Oh, what wonderful things,’ says Fo.

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Inward

There is no time to wonder at the grandeur and majesty of the Inner Sanctum as they are marched through it. Amit is too preoccupied to appreciate the scale of the spacious hallways or the magnificence of the engraved goldwork anyway. He can still taste blood in his mouth.

The denial companies pass frightened citizens and courtiers pouring along the vast processionals in their thousands. Some carry a few possessions, or drag children by their hands. A few call out to the Astartes as they march by. They plead for protection. They beg the Astartes to escort them to a place of safety.

‘Eyes front,’ Tamos Roch instructs over the vox. ‘Maintain pace.’

The deeper they go into the Sanctum, the more they see other armed units taking position. Astartes squads and Excertus brigades, pulled from other sections of the Delphic, are deploying at cross-junctions and confluences, or establishing guard stations at principal hatches. Some are constructing makeshift barricades from salvaged furniture and auramite panels scavenged from walls. Amit sees support weapons being set up and locked off, and platoons mounting crewed guns on tripods. In one hallway, a

squadron of Hort Palatine battle tanks has drawn up, their engines chugging. The denial companies automatically drop to double file to pass around them without missing a step. The heavy treads of the idling Carnodons have cracked the hall's tiled floor to powder. The tanks, begrimed, seem out of place in the regal hallway, though it is easily large enough to accommodate them. Did the Praetorian Dorn anticipate the need for armoured deployment inside the Sanctum when he configured the Palace layout? Amit wonders. Or is the inspiring scale of Imperial architecture simply an advantage the defenders can exploit? The outer walls and gates were robustly crafted for war, but the hallways of the Palace inside were surely constructed to convey splendour?

The further he marches, the more Amit suspects Dorn had prepared for every scenario with a near-obsessive eye for detail. The Palace interiors were not obviously built for war, but in their ornate gold and sumptuous tiling Amit can discern the shrewd touch of a warrior-architect. The subtle traces are everywhere: in the way that grand hallways cross or join at imperceptibly offset angles; the way that staggered lines of statuary plinths provide perfect firing cover across entry spaces; the way that one gallery subtly tapers to create angles of fire into another; the way that upper belvederes are raked to allow enfilade onto the arcades below. Those balustrades are more than gold, he thinks; there is reactive armour under that lustre. Those piered arches overhead conceal blast doors ready to drop and seal choke points. And these grooves and notches that seem part of the sectile flooring's intricate pattern, they are shaped to take the base lugs of storm shields, so that shield walls can be locked in place in an instant to form barriers across plazas and walkways.

All of these inconspicuous measures angle outwards, protecting the heart of the Sanctum.

They approach the Marnix Confluence along a high upper gallery. Over the carved rail, Amit sees columns of stationary figures in the wide processional two hundred metres below. They are not military. Hooded figures and dormant servitors wait in silence beside rows and rows of bio-caskets. There are hundreds of them, each casket floating on a suspensor field.

The caskets look like coffins.

'Is there a problem, brother?' Roch asks him.

Amit realises he has fallen out of line and stopped to gaze at the columns below him.

‘No,’ he says.

‘Reinforcement,’ the Vexillary says, seeing what holds Amit’s attention. ‘For the Throne Room, should it be needed. They are holding until required.’

‘They look like caskets,’ Amit says. ‘Coffins.’

‘Very like,’ Roch agrees.

Roch double-steps with Amit as he resumes his place beside his marching company.

‘Do I have to watch you?’ Roch asks him quietly via discretional helm-to-helm vox.

‘No, Vexillary,’ says Amit.

‘Good,’ says Roch. ‘I expect composure from the Ninth. The Wolves of Fenris are uncouth miscreants, but I have always thought my brothers of Baal as disciplined as my own Legion.’

‘We are. Your forgiveness,’ says Amit.

‘Yet your outburst on the staging level,’ says Roch. ‘Provoked no doubt, but now you break formation–’

‘It won’t happen again,’ Amit replies. ‘Just the sight of those coffins… I have dreamed of coffins.’

‘We’ve all been dreaming of coffins, brother,’ says Roch.

Amit doesn’t bother explaining further. He can’t convey how vivid the caskets in his fugue seemed, how significant, how much more than a dream. But that’s all they were. When a man starts to tell you about his dreams, you smile patiently and nod. Dreams are just dreams.

He can still taste blood in his mouth.

At the Marnix Confluence, a cyclopean concourse where several mass passageways meet, they take up their assigned positions. Roch lays his five denial companies out in block formations across the vast space in front of the mouth of the Western Mass Passageway as though they are on parade. They begin their standing watch again, rigidly at attention, as perfectly composed as they were on the staging level of the Delphic.

They wait. A while passes. A squadron of Knights Asterius lumbers past in the distance and vanishes into the Proserpine Processional. Amit sees Hemheda leave his place at the head of Denial 774. The White Scar crosses

to Roch, and the pair confer. Then Roch calls an order and repositions all five denial companies on the other side of the concourse, now facing a different direction.

‘What is this?’ Lamirus asks Amit. Amit voxes for clarification. Over the link, terse, Roch tells him it is a positional revision.

Amit looks around, and studies the immense confluence. He notes the position of the stately Proserpine Watchtower on the far side beside the processional entrance. He notes the alignment of its gun-ports. He reads the subtle angles of the concourse itself, the tapered slant of adjoining halls, the defensive structures disguised in the regal architecture.

‘We were facing the Throne Room,’ he says.

‘What?’ asks Lamirus.

‘We were facing inward, not outward,’ Amit says. ‘We were turned the wrong way.’

‘How is that possible?’ Lamirus asks.

‘I don’t know, brother.’

‘How does a senior praetorian like Roch get the orientation reversed?’ Lamirus presses. ‘The Imperial Fists know the Inner Palace better–’

‘I don’t know,’ says Amit.

Roch yells a few more orders to correct their position and neaten their ranks. Amit stands in his new spot, silent, patient.

Even from a distance, he can tell that the Vexillary is unsettled.

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Immolation

Thane clears the line with a yelled order. He sees men leap off the parapet, chased by balling tumbleweeds of fire. He sees blackened forms slumped and twisted in the heart of the inferno.

Thane moves to the right, with the veterans and the two initiates. Whipping wyrms of flame pursue them, roaring like a furnace with the door left open. This is an unforeseen event, in a day of unforeseen events, but his company has its standing orders. If the earthwork falls, they are to break apart in two formations, and then re-task to close and pincer the assault from the flanks. Every man, every prentice-brother, knows how this recomposition is supposed to work.

The right-hand end of the earthwork position ends in a series of half-buried bunkers and barrage shelters. It is the only cover. Molwae and Demeny make it first, plunging headlong into the rank darkness. Thane follows, turning in the war-gnawed hatchway to haul Berendol in after him.

He looks back. The entire length of the parapet is lost to cyclones of fire. Blackened Eaters slump and drape over the lip, immolating. Thane smells roasting meat-fat and melting ceramite.

He sees Kolquis. The veteran-brother is five steps behind him, staggering and swaying. He is on fire from head to toe. Thane grabs for him, but the burning veteran howls, placing his burning hands against Thane's chestplate. He shoves Thane into the bunker, and slams the old blast door on him as the rest of the fire arrives.

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The hand of the False Emperor

Abaddon leads the way down the nose ramp himself. The space around him is exactly what he glimpsed through the cockpit ports, but that doesn't make it any more true. It's not Sacristy Field.

His Stormbird is sitting on the landing platform of an embarkation deck. It's Embarkation Deck Two. He has no doubt of that. He knows the place all too well. The space is silent. The eight Stormbirds rest on the intake stands, as though they have just set down and are cooling their engines ready for turnaround. He sees the long causeways of the launch rails, the winking guide lights, the waiting trolleys of munition canisters. He turns, slowly, and sees behind him the vast tunnel of the chamber stretching away towards the integrity fields and open space outside.

Sycar and Baraxa have dismounted too. They walk towards him from their own craft, fire-teams flanking them, gazing around.

'Ezekyle–' Baraxa begins.

'Don't ask me to explain,' Abaddon replies quietly. 'I can't.'

'But we weren't even in the air–'

'I know.'

‘Ezekyle, this is the *Vengeful Spirit*–’

Abaddon looks at him. ‘Stay calm and stay in control,’ he says calmly. ‘I can’t explain this. Someone’s playing games.’

‘Games?’ Baraxa asks, as though the understatement is funny. ‘Who?’

‘The enemy?’ says Abaddon. ‘The warp?’ He shrugs, then offers a third suggestion. ‘Our father?’

‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m saying… however or *why*-ever we got here, Azelas, we are clearly and urgently needed. To save our father. To save him from himself, maybe. I’m saying get the companies disembarked. Ready to move. Expect high resistance levels.’

Abaddon glances around again.

‘I fear the hand of the False Emperor in this,’ he says. ‘My instinct to return was correct. I just wish I’d acted on it sooner, for I fear we are already too late.’

He looks at them.

‘Shake it off,’ he tells them. ‘Get the companies battle-ready. Two minutes. Discipline any who lag. This is… Brothers, my heart tells me this may be the most important undertaking of our lives. So remember… control, brothers, not controlled.’

They nod. They’re both true to him, the only bones in the Legion he knows haven’t broken. They’re alarmed, just as he is alarmed, but they’re not going to let that stop them. They are thrice-damned Sons of Horus, and a little warp-trick is not going to send them running.

‘Our Stormbirds wore Legion colours, Ezekyle,’ says Sycar.

Abaddon nods. He knows that. The Legion’s martial transports were all re-dressed in the new liveries before the end-war began.

The Stormbirds they are exiting are all white, as white as they were in the days of the Luna Wolves.

Abaddon had noticed that right away. He had chosen not to dwell on it.

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The Martian Approaches

‘I have always admired the vigour of the Sixth,’ Praetor-Captain Honfler is saying as he strides along beside Sartak.

‘There’s much to admire,’ Sartak replies.

Honfler ignores the remark.

‘Vigorous, indeed, the Sixth,’ he goes on. ‘Or should I say, the “Vlka Fenris”?’

‘Fenryka. Vlka Fenryka,’ says Sartak.

‘Is that right?’ Honfler doesn’t seem to care. ‘Not many of you here. On Terra. Not many of you among us.’

‘A few,’ agrees Sartak. ‘Not many. I got unlucky.’

The four denial companies are passing under the Antrurium Arch onto a processional that will join the Martian Approaches. A battalion of Eklander Excertus have set up a picket under the arch, with servitor gun-carriages in support. They look up as the Astartes companies pass by in perfect marching order, perfect except for the Fenrisian Space Wolf who turns to throw them a cheery salute. Some wave back.

‘This, you see?’ Honfler says.

‘What?

‘My point–’

‘You have one?’

Honfler draws Sartak off the line, and commands the units to keep their pace.

‘I commend your spirit, Wolf,’ Honfler tells him as the companies stride past. ‘And I know your record. Impressive deeds. It’s why we gave you a unit command. But you Space Wolves, you *Vlka Fenryka*… your comportment is woeful. It borders on insubordinate–’

‘It does,’ Sartak agrees. ‘But impressive deeds. Let’s not forget that part.’

‘When we engage the traitor foe,’ Honfler hisses, ‘and we will, soon, I expect absolute adherence from you. Adherence to command directives. Adherence to the core principles of Astartesian duty. Can you do that, Wolf? Tell me now if you can’t, and I’ll have you replaced. I’m told your sergeant, Rewa Medusi of the Iron Hands, is a reliable officer.’

‘He is,’ replies Sartak. ‘So am I. You’ll get your adherence from me, praetor-captain.’

‘Good,’ says Honfler.

‘But when we engage the traitor foe,’ says Sartak, ‘I expect you to keep up with me. Tell me now if you can’t.’

Honfler stares at him. Sartak smiles back, his fangs showing through the bristles of his plaited beard.

‘I’m sure I’ll manage,’ says Honfler.

They rejoin the march. At the end of the processional, the denial companies pass through a blast hatch onto the Martian Approaches. This thoroughfare, one of the Sanctum’s principal mass passageways, is an immense space built to accommodate even the most massive war engines. The ceiling high above is lost in darkness and a micro-climate haze. The imposing scale is heightened by the fact that the tunnel is empty.

Honfler calls a halt. Behind them, the Martian Approaches stretch away as far as they can see, lit by the sodium lanterns wall-mounted at intervals. But ahead, it is sealed by colossal security gates designed to block Titan engines. At the front of Denial 340, waiting in tight, ordered ranks, Sartak listens as Honfler confers with his officers.

‘What’s the issue?’ Medusi whispers to him.

‘Those gates aren’t supposed to be shut,’ Sartak replies.

‘You can hear them?’

Sartak nods. ‘Honfler’s been told to position us at marker eighteen,’ he says. ‘And that’s beyond those gates. They’re not supposed to be shut. Wait here.’

He wanders forward to join Honfler and his officers.

‘They’ll be shut for a reason,’ Sartak says.

Honfler glances at him. ‘No internal shutters or gates are supposed to be closed yet,’ he says. ‘The War Court has decreed that they will be kept open to allow troop deployment. They are only to be closed in the event of a breach to partition enemy advance.’

‘They’ll be shut for a reason,’ Sartak repeats, a little more slowly.

‘I want them open,’ says Honfler. ‘It’s probably a malfunction.’

‘What if it isn’t?’ Sartak says. The officers look at him. ‘What if it’s a breach?’

Honfler hesitates.

‘If it’s a breach,’ he says, ‘no one knows about it. There have been no alerts. No alarms. It’s undoubtedly a system malfunction. We need the gates open so we can deploy to the correct position.’

‘I am as anxious to meet my enemy as any man here,’ says Sartak. ‘But I don’t want to let him in.’

‘Agreed, Wolf,’ says Honfler. ‘But if it is a breach, and no one is aware, we need to find out.’ He points at the Titan gates. There is a small postern hatch at the base of one of them. ‘We’ll open that hatch,’ he says.

‘My Iron Hands can do that,’ Sartak says.

Honfler nods.

Sartak waves up Medusi and two of his augmeticised seniors. They advance towards the gates with Honfler and a squad of Imperial Fists. Medusi moves to the postern hatch, extending a dendritic manipulator to locate and disable the lock mechanism.

‘Wait, brother,’ Sartak says. He’s staring up at the towering gates.

‘What are you doing?’ Honfler asks.

‘Listening,’ says Sartak.

‘He’s good at that,’ says Medusi.

‘What do you hear, Wolf?’ Honfler asks.

‘Darkness,’ says Sartak.

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Furnace-dream

The darkness of the bunker is like an oven. Thane can feel the heat radiating through the earth embankment, the piled ballistic sacking, and the walls themselves. They can all hear the roaring incineration outside. It is not stopping. Flame-light spears through the cracks in the door frame, and heat-smoke oozes in. The door is beginning to pucker and drool.

Thane gets up, and urges Berendol and the two initiates deeper. They move into the next bunker compartment, and the next, closing shutters where they can. The external heat raises a stink from old solvent stains on the rockcrete floor.

They stumble on into a fourth compartment, then a fifth, finding their way in the hot darkness. They will cook in here. They will broil. If the outer door fails and the fire breaks in, their lives will end in cremation. Thane tries not to think of Kolquis, and the way he sacrificed himself to save them. He tries not to think of the burning, melting figure, still alive…

He leads the way. There is a route out. There *is*. He personally scouted the entire layout of the position when they secured it. A sixth compartment, once used for munition storage, leads to a rockcrete junction. There, to the

left, deep-set blast boxes and flak-curtained sleeping spaces. Straight on, a blast door exits into the support trenches. If they can reach it…

He sees it ahead: the door, plasteel, tight shut. Thane slams into it, but it stays shut. There's no power to the lock system or the servo hinges. He smashes the lock off with his hammer, but the door still won't budge. He feels for clasps, for manual bolts, for locking clips.

'Maximus…' Berendol growls behind him. They feel the air pressure shift. The sucking, smelter-roar behind them becomes a shriek.

Thane puts his hammer into the door, two-handed. It takes three blows to crack it from its frame. As it starts to swing open on buckled hinges, Thane kicks on through, the others following, heedless of what might await them on the other side.

Whatever it is, it is preferable to what's coming down the throat of the compartments behind them.

Thane slams the door to block it out. He hammers it four times, five, with the rapid haste of a prentice-brother, to deform its buckled shape back into place enough to hold.

'Maximus,' says Berendol.

He hammers again, manic, pinching the metal of the frame so it will pin the door.

'Maximus.'

Another dent across the sill to crush it into place.

'Thane!'

Thane turns. He is dazzled. For a second, he thinks the Mechanicum has drenched the support trenches with bulk flamers too, torching the back line, so they have escaped from one inferno into another.

But the glare is not firelight. It is golden, yellow-golden, the purest colour of fire, but not fire itself.

And the trench is not a trench.

'What is this?' asks Berendol.

A dream, thinks Thane. An error. A mistake. A wrong turn. A vision. He has not escaped. The flames consumed him, like they consumed Kolquis, and he is dead, and this is the furnace-dream his mind has cooked in its last seconds.

A hallway, grand and magnificent. The air is cool, stirred only by circulation systems. Their feet are leaving tracks of ash and grit and filth on

the gleaming mirror of the ouslite floor. The walls are burnished auramite, engraved with symbols of concordia and discordia, and soaring eagle motifs overlaying lightning bolts. Electro-flambeaux pendants hang high above them, depending from a ceiling of azure tiles. The hallway goes on forever.

‘There was nowhere like this in the zone…’ says Berendol.

‘Nowhere,’ Thane agrees.

‘Did you survey the–’

‘Of course I did.’

‘Then how did you miss this door?’ Berendol asks. ‘And this bunker? Is it some–’

‘It’s not a bunker,’ Thane says. ‘Do not expect me to give you an explanation, my brother, but we are inside the Sanctum.’

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The asset

The tower shudders slightly as something deep below them flexes in seismic discomfort. In the laboratorium's cold store units, sample flasks and vials rattle in their racks, and a sheaf of papers slides off the edge of the workstation.

Basilio Fo doesn't seem to notice.

Andromeda-17 watches him work. Fo has hunched his bag-of-twigs frame cross-legged in one of the high-backed work chairs. He has multiple cogitator screens open, sliding with data. He has hooked in an earpiece, through which he is listening to the data-system recite the contents of stored files, one after another. With his right hand, he is scribbling indecipherable notes on a data-slate. With his left, he is sorting through other data-slates, comparing other files, occasionally taking a glass tube out of the sample racks to give it a shake or hold it up to the light and examine its contents, or slipping another glass slide under the macroreader.

'What are you doing?' she asks.

'Quiet,' Fo replies, not looking at her (for I really can't abide interruptions when I am engrossed).

Andromeda glances at Xanthus. The Chosen is standing by the spiral stairs, arms folded. Like her, he seems both mystified by, and dubious of, Fo's activities.

'You will need to keep us apprised,' Xanthus says. 'Every step of the way. Understand that this limited liberty and unusual opportunity has been arranged under the most extraordinary circumstances. We can't maintain your protection from other agencies if you keep us in the dark.'

Fo plucks out the earpiece and turns his chair to face Xanthus.

'We're all going to be in the dark very soon, aren't we?' he says. 'And that darkness, when it falls, will be without end.'

'Time is certainly in short supply,' Xanthus admits.

'Oh, time's gone!' Fo scoffs, pointing a scrawny finger at the stopped chron on the wall. 'Time is a thing of the past. Let me assure you both that I am fully aware of the precarious position I am in. A political tug-of-war, with me as the rope, and all the while, the world literally burns around us. By "other agencies", I assume you mean the damn Legio Custodes?'

'To begin with,' says Xanthus. He is uncomfortable saying their name aloud. Amon is far below, guarding the Retreat's entrance, but Xanthus is aware how superhumanly sharp the ears of the Custodians can be.

Fo sneers at that (they're so afraid of each other! So cautious, even now! He, the great big He, is so proud of His unified Imperium, but in truth the factions comprising it seem to have been in jurisdictional dispute since long before the actual civil war broke out).

'I am confident that the two of you will continue to protect me,' he says, 'because I think the two of you have begun to realise how important I, the reviled and abhorred monster, have suddenly become to the survival of the human race.'

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5:xxxiv

The judgement of Vulkan

At Vulkan's signal, the supplicants are escorted from the Throne Room. The primarch watches as they are led away, until they are mere specks at the end of the nave, approaching the Silver Door.

'What actions will you take, my lord?' asks Hassan of the Chosen, who has stayed back.

'What actions *can* I take, Chosen One?' Vulkan replies. 'Our hands are tied. We have critical duties to carry out, and we cannot be distracted by–'

'But they spoke with conviction,' says Hassan. 'The men, Grammaticus and Persson, they were credible. And this talk of a newborn power, of Lupercal's ascendancy–'

'May just be talk,' says Vulkan. 'And if it is not, then it is a matter beyond my knowledge. We are prosecuting this war, above and below, with every means at our disposal. I do not know how we prosecute a threat that is not yet manifest.'

Kaeria Casryn of the Sisterhood, who is also attending him, steps directly in front of him to emphasise her presence. It is an oddly confrontational habit common among nulls, who are so easily overlooked if they stray out

of eyeline. Vulkan remembers that Krole used to do the same.

Such matters are the purview of our lord the Emperor and the Sigillite alone, she signs in thoughtmark. *They left you no instruction?*

'No,' says Vulkan. 'And now neither can be consulted. But clearly, they knew of it, at least in part. Lacking direct instruction from them, I can only continue with the orders they issued me. We must presume that what we are doing, to some extent, will guard against this outcome as well.'

If it is real, Casryn signs.

You think it not? Vulkan signs back deftly.

I think the supplicants admitted only a fraction of the truth they know, she replies, her hands quick. *I think they withheld. I think they have agendas they did not dare speak of.*

Vulkan nods.

I do not trust them, she adds. *The witch especially*.

'Agreed,' says Vulkan.

'Then… what would you have me do with them, lord?' Hassan asks.

Silence them, signs Casryn.

'Surely not,' says Hassan.

In an hour of ultimate danger, they are one potential threat we can do without, she shapes. *Silence them*.

Hassan looks at Vulkan.

'I will not commit murder on behalf of the Imperium,' says Vulkan. 'Especially without evidence of actual crime. The fact that they are an unknown quantity, and we are made uncomfortable by them, is not sufficient.'

He turns to Hassan.

'Go have the Sentinels secure them, Chosen One,' he says.

'In the Antirooms?' asks Hassan.

'Preferably,' says Vulkan, 'if Companion Raja deems that facility safe enough. If not, the Dark Cells. Your discretion, Hassan. Whatever you choose, the members of that party must be prevented from any further participation, for the duration of this war.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'I err on the side of the good Sister's instincts,' says Vulkan, casting a glance at Casryn. 'Those people are dangerous, in ways we cannot yet fathom. They will be denied liberty and agency until this crisis is over and

we can evaluate them properly.’

Hassan hesitates, then makes the sign of the aquila, and strides away after the departing procession.

Vulkan sighs, and turns. He begins to walk the length of the great chamber towards the painful light of the Throne. Casryn walks at his side, a ghost in his peripheral vision.

‘You think me too merciful?’ he asks.

Not my place to comment on your decisions, lord, she signs.

Vulkan nods. He expected nothing else. Malcador has submitted to the Throne. His father and his brother primarchs are gone and may never return. All decisions, the making of which might save or doom the human race, are now his alone. No one else is going to do it.

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5:xxxv

When all we have left is our faith in monsters

I appreciate the web I'm caught in, Chosen One,' says Fo (more than you can begin to realise). 'I am an asset, but also a notorious and condemned criminal. I am deemed a pernicious threat to your Imperial ideology. But my weapon could end this nightmarish war by eradicating the Astartesian genetic line. And the Custodes… I beg your pardon, the *other agency*… would welcome that, for the Imperium would be preserved, and so too His life. So they want me locked up for their exclusive use, along with anything I invent for them.'

'Old man–' Andromeda begins.

Fo turns to look at her.

'On the other hand,' he says, '*other agencies* at the highest level of the Imperium would not look kindly on the eradication of the sons and grandsons of the Emperor. It is an extreme solution, swingeing in effect. Furthermore, it would unbalance the power structure, and place far too much influence in the hands of the already overpowered Custodes. So Malcador's Chosen' – he glances at Xanthus – 'another entirely unelected and unofficial *other agency*, is attempting to block the Custodes' exclusive

control of me. And this is no mean feat, because the Custodians are physically and psychologically stronger than just about anything, and you can't trick them. So the Chosen, unilaterally, and in extremis, have called upon the services of… What should I call you, girl?'

He looks back at Andromeda. She makes no response.

'An independent contractor of the Selenar,' Fo says sardonically, 'to help circumvent the Custodes. You can't rendition me directly, not from their keeping, and especially not at a time like this, a phrase that I'm finding qualifies just about everything we say–'

'Fo–' says Andromeda.

'Anyway,' says Fo, 'the intrigue you're conducting is torturous. You can't take me from the Custodes, because you don't have the authority, but you can persuade that brute Amon to go along with the idea that the weapon I have made requires urgent revision and refinement. This *coup de force* could only be achieved by having your' – he grins again at Andromeda – 'independent contractor of the Selenar use her formidable talent for non-linear ethical reasoning to convince the Custodian that he wasn't disobeying his duties, but rather performing them in an even more exact fashion. Make him think that he would be derelict *not* to assist you. To pull that off, and maintain the subterfuge to its natural conclusion, at which point I would be in your pocket rather than Valdor's, you had to bring me here and make it appear that I was busy fixing something that didn't really need to be fixed, which is apparently a wholesale waste of time.'

Fo fixes them both with a chilling smile.

'An accurate summary?' he asks (knowing full well it's at least half-right. I just want to survive. I need to keep them all at bay). 'I assure you that I'm happy to make myself look busy in order to pull off the deception.'

'Your assessment of this situation is of no interest,' says Andromeda. 'And your attempts to manipulate us by appearing compliant are pointless. We are not your friends, Fo. The genocides you committed before Unification will never be forgiven.'

Fo's smile turns into a scowl.

'We are only interested in the weapon and its effective function,' says Xanthus.

'I see,' says Fo.

'And you're deflecting about the fix not being necessary,' says

Andromeda.

‘Am I, Selenar?’ says Fo.

‘You have a tell,’ she says.

‘And what might that be?’

‘If I tell you it won’t be a tell any more, now, will it?’ she says.

‘I imagine not,’ Fo says. ‘For the record, I’m sure it’s my habit of over-engineering every explanation. I do it to distract from the fact that my mind is occupied elsewhere. In this case, on the redevelopment of the weapon.’

‘That’s just more deflection,’ says Andromeda. ‘However, your perusal of the Sigillite’s private materials is rather too eager and hungry. Hence my original question. *What are you doing?*’

Fo hesitates. (I don’t like either of them. They’re both too cunning.)

‘Well, gene-witch,’ he says, ‘at the risk of further explanatory over-engineering, it would appear that the lie you spun to get me here is not a lie after all.’

‘The weapon doesn’t work?’ Andromeda asks.

‘Oh, it works,’ says Fo. ‘But I could build a better one.’

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5:xxxvi

If the enemy awaits

‘You can’t hear darkness, Wolf,’ says Praetor-Captain Honfler.

‘No,’ Sartak agrees. ‘No, I cannot. But there is an emptiness beyond these gates. A silence, with nothing in it.’

‘Open it,’ Honfler says to the Iron Hands warriors.

‘I would not, brother-captain,’ Sartak says.

Honfler looks at him. The fact that the Space Wolf is suddenly showing respect, and in earnest, bothers him more than any previous insolence Sartak has displayed.

‘You were so eager to meet the foe, Wolf,’ Honfler says, ‘you all but disregarded my direct commands so you could get at them. Now you balk?’

A little flash of anger crosses Sartak’s face. He bites it back.

‘The Great Angel closed the gate,’ he growls. ‘I will not have the skjalds sing of Odi Sartak as the fool who opened another.’

Honfler nods. ‘If the enemy awaits, we need to know. If they’re inside…’

He looks at his equerry.

‘Anything from the Hegemon? Any tactical intel?’

‘No response, sir. Vox is down again.’

Honfler looks up at the towering curtain of the engine gates. ‘We need to know,’ he says. ‘My call. I’ll go.’

‘Praetor-captain–’

‘Four companies can hold a postern hatch,’ Honfler says, ‘at least long enough to raise the alarm. We have to know. Open it, Medusi.’

The Iron Hands sergeant turns to the lock and begins to dismantle it. Honfler’s officers form a bracket formation behind him, bolters raised. Honfler draws his blade and his bolt pistol.

Sartak is beside him.

‘What are you doing?’ Honfler asks.

‘Going with you,’ Sartak replies, as though it’s obvious.

‘Ready the companies for repulse in case this turns to shit,’ Honfler says.

‘Medusi can do that,’ says Sartak. ‘He’s a reliable officer. I’m going with you, son-of-Dorn.’

‘More disobedience?’

‘Of the best kind,’ replies Sartak.

‘Wolf–’

‘I may have misunderstood your use of the word “adherence”,’ says Sartak.

The postern hatch unlocks with a clunk. Medusi hauls it open. It is half a metre thick.

Darkness beckons.

Honfler steps through. Sartak follows him.

There is nothing on the other side except a sense of invisible space. The blackness is so deep their enhanced optics and transhuman eyes can barely see more than a few metres.

‘Power failure,’ says Honfler softly. ‘That would explain why the engine gates shut. Automatic lockdown–’

‘Shhh,’ Sartak hisses. Though he can’t see it, he can sense that the space around them is vast. The Martian Approaches are vast, but this feels bigger still.

He glances back. He sees Rewa Medusi framed in the oblong slab of light of the open postern, bolter ready. Sartak flashes quick hortcode commands.

‘A breeze…’ he murmurs to Honfler.

‘Air-circ venting–’

‘Either the power has failed or it hasn’t.’

He sniffs. The air seems fresh. No, it’s thick with traces of wet soil, chemical-burn, dust, fyceline, smoke. It’s cold. But it’s not the dank, re-filtered over-recycled air of the Sanctum’s sealed micro-climate.

He squats, and feels the invisible ground. Not rockcrete. Not the heavy-grade surfacing of the Martian Approaches built to take the step of war machines. It’s earth. Wet, gritty earth. Somehow–

‘The enemy hasn’t breached,’ he whispers. ‘The enemy is not inside. We’re outside.’

‘Outside? Of what?’ asks Honfler.

‘The Sanctum,’ whispers Sartak.

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5:xxxvii

Doom manifest

Abidemi approaches them from the direction of the Throne. The urgent pace of his trusted lieutenant's stride fills Vulkan with concern.

'My Lord of Drakes,' says Abidemi with a quick nod. 'The adepts of the Concillium wish you to know that they are seeing a sudden, massive spike in immaterial dynamics.'

'Meaning?'

'Perhaps…' The Draaksward hesitates. 'A new event, an anomaly… a new focus of empyric energy.'

'Where?' Vulkan asks. 'Within the webway?'

Abidemi shrugs. 'Or on Terra, or perhaps the traitor fleet. It seems to be everywhere.'

Is this just the next stage of the crisis? Casryn signs. *The world is being drowned in the warp, Draaksward. Levels of immaterial activity are bound to increase incrementally as–*

'No,' says Abidemi. 'I do not understand the art of it, but they tell me this is a particular event, as though a vast concentration of immaterial power has broken free or ignited.'

‘How vast?’ Vulkan asks.

‘The adepts tell me their instruments are not calibrated high enough to measure it.’

Vulkan starts to stride towards the Throne. He is no longer walking. The other two move with him.

‘Explanation?’ Vulkan asks as he moves.

‘None, my lord,’ Abidemi replies.

Perhaps the manifestation of this Dark King? Casryn signs.

Vulkan ignores her.

‘An explanation is beside the point,’ says the Draaksward. ‘The event is destabilising the Throne. Whatever control the Sigillite has left, it is insufficient. The Regent is burning out. His control is slipping, and he is about to perish entirely. When that happens…’

He doesn’t finish. He doesn’t have to.

Vulkan knows exactly what will happen then.

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5:xxxviii

Wonder

It is impossible to behold the Emperor any more. There is light everywhere, a light so fierce it has erased all shadows. The flagship around them is almost lost in a white and painful glare of absolute brilliance. Like the shock-flash of an atomic weapon, it cremates and evaporates the daemonic storm besieging them.

But the flash does not subside. It is not a blink of detonation. It lasts, permanent and harsh.

Proconsul Caecaltus can feel the heat of it at his back. He feels himself broiling inside his Aquilon armour, and his armour superheating. He feels as though he is standing beside a newborn supernova.

How glorious…

Caecaltus cannot look at his master. He couldn't even if he wanted to. His King-of-Ages is keeping Caecaltus turned away by force of will. Through His investment in them, He is keeping the gaze of all the Companions averted.

If we look, one glimpse of that glory would melt our eyes. If we behold it, even for a nanosecond, it would burn our brains. I can feel the light inside

me, scouring my flesh and bones, my very cells, like an inferno. My blood is steam. My armour is molten.

If He lets us look at Him, we will die.

But oh my king, for just one split-second glimpse of your wonder, it would be worth it.

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5:xxxix

A last glimpse

Oh.

Oh, I–

Nhhh–

You think–

You think you’re a god, first-found?

Let me tell you…

Mnnhh!

Your father… your father has worn many aspects in his life, each one to suit the purpose at hand.

He wears a new one now, bright and steadfast as a star. He will be what *you* need him to be.

He will show you the face you need to see to stop you in your tracks and *beg* for mercy.

You think you’re becoming a god? Let him show you what true power looks like.

Look. *Look!*

Gnnh.

You see it?

I wish I could. I can’t. Not any more.

My time has come now.
My end.
My vision is fading fast, my mindsight burned out.

I try to hold on, but my will is spent. The visions that you, Horus Lupercal, in your cruelty, share with me, bleach away and vanish, diffused into a blinding white glare that is too bright to look at.

I think that light is him.

I think it is my friend, the Emperor, more empowered than he has *ever* been, so brilliant that the light of him burns through my skull, star-bright.

But perhaps it is you, Horus. Perhaps evil manifest is also too bright to behold.

But I cannot be sure. It’s too bright to see.

I cannot see anything–
I cannot–

I’m sorry. I’m sorry, my old friend. I tried my best. I did all I could–
My end is here and I cannot–

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5:xl

Steadfast

Death is upon them now, sooner than he wished, faster than he dreaded. The best of Terra, the brightest and mightiest ever to wear the emblems of humanity, are done. Forty-three seconds were the best they could do before the Lupercal's wrath dragged them down into the oblivion of the pit and consumed them utterly.

Constantin rages at this as he falls. He screams with indignation and wounded pride. He was determined they would be the ones who would prevail. They would be the ones to claim the victory. He, and his men, would show the bastard traitor how war was truly fought.

But no. Forty-three seconds. That's all they could manage. Them, the greatest champions in the Emperor's host. Forty-three paltry seconds–

Forty-four.

He sees a light ignite. He is on his knees, thrown down by the peristaltic convulsions of the glistening ground. He thinks it's a flare at first. A distress flare fired by one of his company, or the slow fusion-burn of a dying Adrathic.

It is not. It is singular and constant. A point of light, far away, but white-

hot, rising like a star. The light bathes them. It illuminates the belly of the pit like a frosty twilight, and throws out long shadows. It makes the wet meat of the ground gleam, and reflects in the pools of blood and bile.

Constantin struggles to his feet. The laughter has subsided, the singing too, chased into the clefts and folds of the pit and wherever else the suffocating darkness has fled to. He sees the landscape for what it is, a swollen canyon of pestilential flesh, glittering with mucus, throbbing with an angry, intestinal pulse, littered with the miserable, broken remains of his dead. He sees where the flesh of the place is riveted like deck plates, and where rusted bulkhead staples – massive things used in emergency hull repairs – are holding torn panels of stomach lining and brawn together as walls.

He concentrates on the light. It glows like a full snow moon, silver-bright, very distant. It hangs over the nearby cliffs of diseased flesh, visible through the forking branches of exposed ribs and stretched shrouds of fat, like a single bright and steadfast star rising on a clear night, seen through trees from a forest glade.

He can feel the light too, in his heart, in his soul. He can feel the trace of mindsight in it, reaching out, searching, seeking. The trace is weak, not enough to fill him and harness him so he becomes part of it, but enough for him to taste and recognise, enough to wash, like cool, clear water, the sticky darkness out of his eyes and mouth and brain, and renew a spark of hope.

Enough to help him stand. Enough to let him know.

Enough to guide him.

‘It’s Him,’ he whispers, but his neuro-synergetics, refreshed and renewed, tell him his words are pointless. His surviving Companions know it too. They, like him, have risen to gaze at the light.

Constantin starts forward at once. The others follow him. They crunch across glittering rimes of dried blood and shivering creases of skin and sinew. The gloom is nocturnal and the air still turbid, but they can see the light, clear and true, a sizzling star of great magnitude and clarity.

They have it fixed. They have it to guide them. There will be greater torment ahead, no doubt, but they have a path to follow at last. They start to run.

They are forty-five seconds into the fight.

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5:xli

Dawn

He wipes red dust off what remains of his blade, and resumes his work.

‘I am Rogal Dorn,’ he says. He clears the dust from his throat. He picks up where he left off, perhaps hours or centuries earlier. ‘Long ago, a philosopher and sometime remembrancer proposed a framework for the conduct of war, suggesting that war was permissible if it resulted in secure peace. But this was compromised by the notion that war could be divided into *just war*, which was that waged against outsiders, and *unjust*, which was war waged upon one’s own people. This distinction remains. War to suppress or annihilate an outside threat, that which is xenos, is judged as justified as a means of security. Civil war is regarded as unjust and an abomination. Not all blood is the same.’

The sounds of war grow louder. The wall vibrates slightly, sifting red dust down onto his working hands.

His hands are blood red.

He ignores it.

He steps back to examine his latest diagram. Out of the wall’s shadow, the sunlight is hard and strong. He looks up and sees, for the first time in a

century or two, for the first time since he arrived, however that happened, that there is a sun in the sky. Everything is blood red – the wall, the desert, the sky, the dust – but there is a sun now. It is more of a star, in truth. A single, steadfast star. It is small, white, bright, fierce. It is the only thing the sky has done in the whole time he has been here, except change colour.

He closes his eyes and feels the light and heat on his skin. He basks, for a second.

Just give in.

He goes back in under the shadow of the red wall, and returns to his work. His worn-away nub of sword scritches new lines of escape and defence. He resumes his recitation.

‘A later philosopher formulated the principal criteria that serve as the foundation for warfare in civilised societies. There are two – *just cause* and *formal authority*. Only a king or an emperor can declare war, and then only if it has legal justification, such as the protection of a culture. It is otherwise illegal and forbidden, even for gods.’

The noise of war on the other side of the wall becomes a palpable roar.

Give in. Give up. Let go. Just say it. Blood for the Blood God.

‘There are no gods,’ says Rogal Dorn.

He leans close to the wall, his mouth almost touching it.

‘Not even you,’ he whispers.

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5:xlii

The tip of the spear

His vision melts into burning white. All he sees is a tunnelled disc of light, white-hot, like a distant, baleful star. He hears screaming.

For a second, there is stillness: upturned and stretched upon the enemy mass, head back, he almost lets go to the pain and allows it to swallow him. But the star, small and pure white, shines at him out of the blood-black darkness, solitary, bright, steadfast, unblinking.

In the blackness, he hears screaming. The screaming is coming from him. He is screaming at himself to remember who he is.

Sanguinius.

He flexes his entire frame, and breaks the mob's grip upon him. He crashes awkwardly to the bloody deck, and the reeling enemies surge onto him.

Sanguinius.

He endures their frenzied blows. He has one foot planted.

Sanguinius.

He rises.

He rises with such inhuman force, fully plated Astartes are thrown into the

air and tumble off him. Yelling in rage, he slays, without mercy or pause, those foolish enough to remain near, or those too slow to drag themselves back. Blood trails arc from his sword-blade and spear-tip. He springs forward, wings out to lift him, and swoops low over the heads of two Justaerin brutes who sprawl, lacerated, in his slipstream. He evades the chasing shots of a Catulan trio, spears one to a pillar, disembowels the second with a twisting slice, and crushes the third Reaver under his feet. He strides away from the mangled smear, tracking gore behind him, strikes another Justaerin to the ground, and skewers a Cthonic Heavy.

He is now on the far side of the Great Atrium, facing the sealed inner hatches: forward access, command levels, cut off by great interlocked doors of black adamantine. Stray shots strike the peppered wall around them, and spark off the hatches. Sanguinius glances back. The atrium is pure, hellish turmoil, veiled in smoke, like a section of the Palatine war scooped out and locked in a box for display.

He turns to the hatch. The activators are locked off, and thrusting the burning blade of *Encarmine* into their sparking guts does not release them. He shreds out the power instead, cutting all the feed trunking in crackling cascades of voltaic sparks.

He sheathes *Encarmine*, and faces the doors. He cannot prise them apart. His fingertips can find no grip in the nearly seamless join. He gasps in effort and frustration. Is Maheldaron close by? Krystapheros? Anyone with remaining breaching charges?

There’s no time. If Horus realises his brother is this close, he may choose to flee, to regroup, to mutate the clean ending of this conflict into some clumsy, drawn-out farce. Sanguinius takes up the *Spear of Telesto*, and slides the slim, perfect tip into the join. He puts his weight into it, and wedges the spear-tip’s elongated teardrop deeper, deforming the seam, grinding bright silver splinters and ringlets of shaved metal from the black doors. When the spear is as deep as it will go, as deep as the blood-drop hollow, he flexes his grip around the auramite haft and unleashes its power.

The blast is a flare of lambent blue light that shudders the haft in his hands. The join around the blade is scorched, and drips molten rivulets. He looses the power again, and the hatches shiver. The join has parted, forced open by the compressed fury of the burst. Now he has it. He jams the spear in deeper, and hauls upon it, using it as a lever to drag the doors apart. They

are thick, thirty centimetres deep. He yells out in effort as he drives every part of his primarch strength into the spear, feet planted, back stretching, arms locking. The spear's haft begins to bend slightly under tension. Veins bulge in his neck and temple. Torsion flexes the wound in his side, making it weep again.

The pain spurs him. He leans into it and exerts more force. Slowly, very slowly, the huge doors begin to scrape open.

As soon as he has levered enough of a gap, he pulls the spear out and plants it, tip down, in the deck. Its perfect form shows no sign of bend or distortion. He squeezes sideways into the gap, and begins to force it wider, pushing one side with his hands, the other with his shoulder, teeth gritted, shaking.

Some traitors have seen his effort and his violation. Squads break from the battle and move towards him, firing their weapons. Bolt-rounds detonate against the hatch around him. One misses his face by millimetres and passes clean through the narrow opening. A Horusian Terminator, advancing at a rapid stride, begins to hose at him with its flamer mount.

Krystaph Krystapheros cuts the Terminator down. He rushes to his lord's aid. Sarodon Sacre joins him, and Dytal Maegius. Then Ikasati too. They sweep into the traitors advancing on Sanguinius, and kill them, and then form a ragged ring to fend off any further assault. Their bolters start to thunder as more Sons of Horus break from the fight and come charging out of the wreathing smog. Krystapheros, first to his side, grabs the edge of one door and starts to drag at it as Sanguinius shakes in his effort to force them apart.

Then heavy fire comes. The limping, thumping mass of a XVI Legion Dreadnought, which has already claimed far too many Blood Angels this day, looms through the curtains of flame that drape the atrium. Its assault cannons roar their rotary drone. Shots stipple the deck, cracking plasteel. Dytal Maegius spins aside, one leg shredded. Cannon fire stitches the black hatches, stinging off the metal. It catches Krystapheros as he heaves, and blows the upper half of him apart in a blizzard of bloody, shredding tissue. Pieces of pinging red ceramite catch Sanguinius across the cheek, and blood spatters him. Krystapheros' atomised remains plaster the left-hand hatch, gore sliding down its black surface, some matted with hair.

The Angel leaps out of the gap, plucks *Telesto* from the deck, and hurls it

like a spear-fisher before the Dreadnought can take any more of his sons' lives. At thirty metres, the spear impales the striding brute dead centre, and blows it apart in a leaping cataclysm of flame and metal.

Sanguinius looks back at the hatch. The gap is wide enough to pass through, but not wide enough for any mass assault. Whatever awaits on the far side will easily pick off any force that comes through one at a time.

Unless whatever awaits is already occupied.

He runs for the hatch.

'Widen this!' he yells to Sacre and Ikasati. 'Blow it down if you can!'

'My lord!' Sacre yells.

'Do it! Secure this breach and hold it!'

Then he is through. Through into deep and clammy darkness. The sound of the conflict behind him is muffled. A long bar of light tracks into the gloom from the gap between the doors. He hears something call his name.

He draws his sword, moving out of the light. What's here? What's next?

Who's here?

Something detonates outside the hatch. The force, channelled through the gap, knocks him to his knees.

When he rises, the darkness is complete. There is no gap. The doors are firmly interlocked again. He traces the seam. How have they closed? He had cut the power to them. No lateral force from a blast could have slammed them shut.

He can hear nothing from outside. The seam is tight, and he no longer has his lever to prise it apart.

Something sighs in the cold darkness. He spins around, sword ready. A fidget. The hint of movement somewhere. A whisper of voices. Lipless mouths wheezing something, but he can't tell what.

He steps forward slowly. If he has to fight alone, he will. Perhaps that's how this should end.

Perhaps how this is *supposed* to end.

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Fragments (a world turned inside out)

The walls still stand, but there are no longer any walls. The gates remained locked, but there are no longer any locks. Matter no longer matters.

For the warp is inevitable. What it has transmuted outside the final fortress, it now transmutes within. The four sturdy dimensions of the world are maimed and mangled, and in their place other dimensions unfurl their properties, mocking sense and deriding logic with their alien breadths and endless measures. There is no limit to the number of these dimensions, for the immaterium has no definition that the human mind can comprehend.

The Golden Throne was an anchor to keep the warp in check, a linchpin to secure stability at the heart of the final fortress. But Malcador's will is overcome and the Throne burns, out of control. Thus the four dimensions are usurped and the new travesties take their place. Inside, outside, up, down, near, far… all become casualties of the war. Sense and understanding perish. Meaning is lost, or becomes un-meaning, for such is the horrifying mystery of the naked warp.

See now the madness of Horus Lupercal’s ascendancy. Come see, now, the triumph of the False Four, and hear the laughter of dark gods and kings.

One small and steadfast star cannot burn bright enough to pierce the darkness now descending.

‘The enceinte of the Sanctum is six kilometres away,’ says Honfler. ‘Six, Wolf! We cannot be outside.’

‘I know,’ Sartak whispers. ‘But the world has decided to make fools of us both. Walk back to the postern hatch with me, brother. We close it, we bar it. We send word to the Hegemon. We tell them.’

‘Tell them what? That you have lost your mind, and I have lost mine for believing you?’

‘No,’ says Sartak. ‘We tell them there is no Sanctum any more.’

They can barely see each other. They can barely see the oblong of light where Rewa Medusi stands. The blackness is so thick it feels as though they are blind.

Honfler grips Sartak’s arm.

‘Sartak?’

‘Brother?’

‘You still have your axe?’

‘I do.’

‘Are you ready, Wolf?’

‘For what, praetor-captain?’

‘Impressive deeds, brother,’ says Honfler. ‘If we are outside, we are not outside alone.’

Water drips. Agathe runs her hand along a wall. It is stone, dense and almost warm, and not – she shudders at the memory – anything organic. She wonders what kind of heat produced this level of carbon scorching. Everything is so black. But where she touches the stone, no soot comes away on her hands.

Captain Mikhail approaches, leading one of the clearance squads.

‘Secure on that side,’ he reports. ‘We’re just finishing up.’

‘Good,’ she says. ‘Once we can confirm security, we can bring the wounded in, cache our supplies. I want firing points set up at all outer windows and window slits. Can we get on the roof?’

‘I…’ he begins. He looks reluctant.

‘What?’

‘Yes, to what you said. Yes, we can get on the roof, I think. I was just going to say, I think I know what this place is.’

‘Indeed? Enlighten me. It seems so familiar.’

‘I didn’t recognise it from the outside,’ says Mikhail. ‘Because I never saw it from the outside. But inside…’

‘And?’

‘It’s a prison,’ says Phikes, with a sneer. He points. ‘Along that side there, those look like cells to me. Don’t you think? Naturally, he’d recognise it.’

‘Shut up, Phikes,’ says Agathe. She looks at Mikhail. ‘Is it?’

Mikhail nods. ‘I was here for a week, before I was transferred to Gallowhill. A lot of my lads were. It’s a prison. *The* prison.’

Agathe frowns at him, curious.

‘Blackstone,’ he says.

‘Well, it can’t be,’ she says, but as soon as he says it she realises that is exactly what the place reminded her of. The notorious Blackstone, the Palatine’s primary penitentiary.

‘I think it is, mam,’ says Mikhail. One of his men nods.

‘Absolutely not,’ she replies, without conviction.

Mikhail’s trooper, a man known only as Choke, for all of the 403rd are still sticking to forenames, pet names or serials, pulls out his trench spade. He scrapes a gouge in the wall with the bare-metal edge. Soot flecks off, but it’s not soot. Under the black there is more black. Black stone. This isn’t fire damage at all.

‘See?’ says Choke. ‘Mam?’ he adds.

She does. It doesn’t make sense. ‘It’s a prison,’ she says, ‘I’ll grant you. But it’s not *the* Blackstone. It can’t be.’

‘I think it is,’ says Mikhail. It’s not a contradiction. He’s not trying to argue.

‘No one gives a toss for your opinion,’ says Phikes.

‘Phikes,’ she says, ‘go check on the other teams. See how they’re doing.’

The adjutant looks at her. He brushes the front of his Vesperi uniform jacket, throws a quick salute, and wanders off.

Agathe looks back at Mikhail and his crew.

‘It must be another prison,’ she says.

‘Made of black stone, mam?’ he asks.

‘Why not? It’s clearly a strong building material. Whoever planned the Palace’s penal institutions may have had a thing for it. It’s a prison, but it’s not the Blackstone.’

‘I thought the Blackstone was unique,’ says Choke. ‘It had a reputation because there wasn’t another gaol like it…’

‘Yeah,’ says another. ‘The stone, this black stuff, it was shipped in from off-world. That’s what I heard…’

‘It can’t be the Blackstone,’ she says, cutting them short. ‘I… I won’t let it be the Blackstone.’

‘What do you mean?’ asks Mikhail.

‘The Blackstone prison is situated beside the Hegemon in the Sanctum,’ she says. ‘If this is the Blackstone, then we’re somehow over a hundred and sixty kilometres away from where we ought to be, and the final fortress is gone.’

The convict-troopers know this, she realises. They understand it. They don’t want it to be true either.

Phikes reappears. There’s something wrong with him. He’s running, and he normally prefers to strut, chest out.

‘What?’ she asks.

‘You’d better come, mam,’ he says. She’s never heard alarm like this in his voice before, despite all they’ve been through. ‘You… you’d better come.’

Adophel brings word that the tide of Death Guard is re-massing, and that its vanguard of wallbreakers has already commenced a second ascent of the cliffs. The Dark Angels hasten to the bulwarks.

Behind the mask of his potent identity, Zahariel balances his wits and steels the erosive, persuasive power of his mind. Corswain doubts still, but he cannot deny the power of Cypher to unite his weary men. A victory will banish all misgivings and cement the true Order and Spirit of Caliban within the First Legion for all time.

They will be as one, and even the pride of the Lion will not be able to tear them apart.

But what, he wonders, is the value of any victory here? The Palace of Terra may be about to fall. It may have fallen already.

And if it has, what little purpose lies in their desperate travails on this cold

mountainside?

The taste of blood lingers in his mouth. Amit no longer feels that it is the residue of some remembered dream. It feels like the promise of a dream he is yet to have. It tells him that he dares not sleep again. Not ever. He does not want that dream to find him.

The Marnix Confluence is quiet. The denial companies stand in place. Everything is motionless, except for Vexillary Roch, who paces the edge of the concourse in front of them, sword in hand.

‘He should rest,’ Lamirus says on discretional. ‘Steady his focus. Clear his head. We’ll need all our wits soon enough.’

‘Agreed,’ Amit replies. ‘You should too, Lamirus,’ he adds after a moment. ‘You and all the company. While we stand and wait, take the moment to fugue and settle your mind.’

‘I would prefer not, brother,’ the sergeant replies. ‘On the wall, I tried to rest, but–’

‘But?’

‘I had dreams. We all did. They were not soothing.’

Amit turns his head to look at him.

‘What dreams, brother?’

‘I dreamt of our Angel lord,’ Lamirus replies quietly, keeping his gaze fixed forward. ‘All of the men dreamt the same. Our lord was lost, I think. He was in pain too. It was so real, I felt it myself.’

Amit hesitates.

‘Were there coffins, brother?’ he asks.

Now Lamirus glances at him.

‘Coffins, yes. Caskets of stone. There were eighteen of them at least. It was hard to see. There was, I think, a candle, or some single source of light, but it was not bright enough to penetrate the dark. Did you dream this too?’

‘Yes,’ says Amit reluctantly. ‘Tell me what else you saw.’

‘First, there was a chamber,’ Lamirus says. ‘The chamber was large…’

The chamber is large. He remembers, from his time aboard, that this is an entry vault to the command areas, noble and pillared. Sanguinius remembers the layout perfectly. Ahead, perhaps fifty metres, there will be access to the bridge approaches, to the command bridge itself, the

shipmaster’s chamber, the Navigator’s annex, forward gunnery and principal auspex. The primary compartments. Horus kept private quarters here. Rumours – or was it dreams? – have told him that those quarters have become some deranged court, a little throne room to obsequiously glorify the Warmaster.

He’s close. And so is the end.

The darkness is heavy, like moonless night. The air has a sepulchral chill. It doesn’t feel like processed shipboard air. It feels cold and natural, like a winter’s night on some lonely, planet-side retreat.

Another step.

The air smells of dust, of mould, the cold decay of the grave. In the gloom, he sees the way the walls and pillars have stained and decayed, like some untended temple left in the custody of the wind and rain for a thousand years. The deck plates underfoot have corroded, and they flake rust as he walks. Where is the Warmaster’s glory now? A ship run down to dereliction, worn out and unmaintained, a space-borne hulk of its former self.

Water drips somewhere. The dripping makes it sound as though the walls are breathing. It is very dark in the chamber, like being outdoors at midnight on the bleak tracts of Inwit, or the haunted ever-forests of Fenris. Darkness, almost sickly black, strobes slightly, flickering through leaves swayed by the wind. Or something like leaves. He ignores such trickery. He can hear the whispering again, like dead leaves skittering in the breeze or shushing underfoot. Like the dry wing-cases of beetles. Like whirring moths–

What is it they are whispering?

Sanguinius doesn’t care. He continues forward, *Encarmine* ready to strike at a heartbeat.

For a second, he thinks he sees something. A shape. A figure. He moves forward, his focus sharp.

Again, a hint of movement. A glimpse of something up ahead. The shadow of a figure, hunched in full plate. Too big for an Astartes warrior. Too big for a primarch either, at least any still living.

He moves towards it, blade up, but it is no longer there. He senses it to his left, turns, and catches sight of it again for a second before it is gone.

A game? Is his brother toying with him, trying to wear him down and scrape his wits? That won’t work, not after all he has done to get here. Or is

his prey trying to elude him; simply afraid of what will happen when the fight is finally joined?

He tries to ignore the pain, and the taste of blood in his mouth. When he looks down, he sees, in the gloom, the blood seeping from beneath his placket and running down his thigh plate, like red thread, tangled and knotted. That is where the sound of dripping is coming from.

The shadow stirs again, ahead of him. He won't lose track of it again. He spurs forward, moving faster, ignoring the pain, ignoring the limp it imposes on him.

He passes through a great archway into another chamber. There is light coming from somewhere, faint and warm, like a single candle spreading a feeble glow. A vault. A crypt. Its proportions are monumental and impossible to judge in the enclosing shade. The deck is paved stone. There is the hint of a barrel-vault ceiling overhead, also stone, but too swathed in shadow to make out.

There are objects here. Rectangular blocks of considerable size, each laid flat on their longer side, ranged in two neatly spaced rows with an aisle between them. There are twenty of them.

Sanguinius approaches. Close to, he sees they are made of stone. They are draped in sheets of amaranthine cloth. The colour of mourning.

Sword raised, braced in a double-handed grip that will make his first blow as powerful as it can be, Sanguinius stalks forward between the rows. Amaranthine sheets cover all but one of the blocks. That one, the second from the end in the right-hand row, is bare, its sheet folded flat into a square and placed on its top.

He moves towards it. It *is* stone. A stone casket. Its lid is slid slightly ajar, resting, waiting to be closed and sealed. The lid, he sees, is engraved with the numeral IX.

'You were a long time coming, but you are here at last.'

Sanguinius wheels at the sound of the voice. He knows it. He knows it all too well, and the sound of it hurts him more than the pain in his side.

The huge, plated shadow is staring at him, broad and immense, framed against the feeble light.

It steps between the tombs and he sees its face.

'I have been waiting for you,' says Ferrus Manus.

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5:xliv

A world turned outside in

The Delphic Battlements rain havoc on the ground below. Relentless bombardment from the wall guns flays the earth back to the bedrock, and fills the air with cloudbursts of lethal shrapnel.

The barrage, fierce enough to consume an armour column, lacerates the charging line of traitors, killing thousands and annihilating the siege engines and mobile turrets they are dragging. Traitor engines, advancing with the waves of infantry, are shredded and demolished. A ten-kilometre run of the wall's talus becomes a sheeting jungle of flame and phosphorescent fire.

It is the sixth mass assault that has been scourged and repelled in fifteen minutes. There seems to be a limitless reserve of traitor forces gathering in the darkness beyond the final fortress. Their attacks are now constant, wave after wave, their losses immense, but for every thousand slaughtered as they race to reach the walls, another ten thousand emerge from the battle-smog to try their turn, and for every siege tower obliterated, another ten are rolled out ready by magi of the Dark Mechanicum. Feral banners loom through the flowing smoke, foul standards of Chaos visible from the walls,

multiplying in number like poison weeds, indicating the unearthly armies and murderous legions drawing close and assembling for assault. A keening fills the poisoned air; the blare of war-horns that shake the heavens, the ululation of demented priesthoods, the grumble of a billion drums, the clack and croak of inhuman hosts.

Lucoryphus, Raptor, Night Lord, is surprised to discover himself alive.

He was in the thick of the latest assault, caught by the bombarding rage that incinerated and liquidised the World Eaters, Sons of Horus and Death Guard charging with him. Lucoryphus had been soaring ahead, with others of his breed, carried by the burning streamers of their jump packs, above the common rabble of the ground troops. They had just begun their climbs towards the soaring upper parapets. A shell blast, which pulped the warriors beneath him, lifted him on its shockwave like a clod of soil, and hurled him through the air.

He rises to his feet, bruised, bones battered. He has been thrown right against the foot of the Delphic wall, another broken corpse amid the debris and scraps of meat littering the immense, unbreachable stones of the almighty battlement. His jump pack is mangled. He looks up. The wall is a thousand metres high, strung with kill-wire and down-angled spikes. It is unscalable, for anybody, including him, who would wish to be alive when they reached the summit.

He sees another mass wave preparing to come in. When they begin to move, the wall’s guns will start to welcome them again, and this entire stretch of ground, still smoking, vitrified, and radiating blast-heat from the last charge, will become a fiery hell once more.

And it will consume him.

Eager, almost desperate, like a sharp-eyed corvid, he looks around, searching for something, anything, that he can use as cover. He spots a stone culvert, some kind of drainage outflow, and hobbles towards it, like a clumsy, grounded vulture, ditching his useless jump pack. As he reaches the culvert, he sees how shallow it is, little more than a niche. It won’t protect him, but he claws his way under the lip of it anyway.

The wave comes. He hears the jeering roar and the blast of horns. Within seconds, the walls reply. The ground shakes. The noise is unbearable. Pressure hammers him, and he rattles like a pebble in the cramped aperture of the culvert.

Lucoryphus can’t guess what will happen first. Will he burn and cook, or will he be vibrated to sludge by the shock-pressure? He starts to scream. It is an inglorious and obscure end for one such as him, who has performed some of the greatest feats of the war. The name Lucoryphus should have been etched on the Warmaster’s plate, and hymned by daemons as a champion of the ages. A warrior who has achieved what primarchs have failed to do should not meet an anonymous end in a drain like a diseased rat. He was the first of the host to top the walls, the first to carry the battle into the False Emperor’s Palace. This is not a fit or fair end for so illustrious a hero–

The blast-rush, monumental, crushes him into the culvert slabs. He is wrenched inside out, atomised, reduced to pulp, to jelly, to steam, to particles, torn to burning tatters that are torn, in turn, to sparks–

He opens his eyes, surprised to find he still has eyes. The floor is cold. His skin is burning, but that’s just residual heat bleeding out of his scorched and smoking plate. He rises to his hands and knees, blood drooling from his mouth. He can smell seared flesh, and knows it is his own.

He rises. The culvert is gone. The massive talus of the wall is gone. The wall itself, the insurmountable cliff of the Delphic, is gone.

He doesn’t know where he is.

An empty hallway stretches before him. He turns, and sees it stretch away as far again behind him. The walls are auramite, inlaid with intricate figures. The floor is swirled marble, buffed like a looking glass. The ceiling is very high, and strung with ornate pendant lamps.

Terror fills him. He understands where he is, though he cannot explain how he got there. He is all alone, and the terror of that ballasts his chest and gut like cement.

But there is joy too, joy that carves through his fear. Blessed by the gods, he cannot be killed, and his fame is cast immortal. There will be statues of him. Cities, whole worlds, will be named in his honour.

‘Mino premiesh a minos murantiath!’ he murmurs in the mother tongue of his home world.

For he is now the first-of-all *twice*. First to cross the Palace walls, and now first inside the final fortress.

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PART SIX

THE INEVITABLE CITY

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6:i

Unravelled

They've had their chance, and now it's gone.

They are led away, flanked by the terrifying Sentinel giants and the distressing Sisters of Silence. No one speaks. No one dares. They are all afraid. For a brief moment, it had felt like they were going to be listened to. But the moment passed, and their reception was ended, and now they are being marched to some unspecified doom.

Oll hopes it's detention. A cell, a prison. It's probably going to be worse than that.

They were lucky Vulkan even listened as long as he did. The crisis is greater and darker and deeper than even the worst Oll has imagined. Vulkan, the only figure of authority left, is facing decisions and choices beyond mortal consideration. Oll knows that even a brief audience with him was remarkable. At the end of their conversation, Oll had tried to plead with him.

'My lord,' he had said, 'let us help you. Let us help the Imperium of Man.'

Vulkan hadn't asked how. He hadn't bothered, and even if he had, Oll would have been at a loss to give him a credible answer. Vulkan had merely

gestured to the immense Throne Room around them.

‘*This* is the Imperium of Man,’ he had said to Oll. ‘This and only this. Everything and everywhere else is debatable, questionable and conflicted. The only part of the Imperium that remains intact and defined is this room. It is all I command. The Imperium of Man, which once straddled the stars, is reduced to this chamber, Ollanius. What territory remains is what I can see here, in my ambit. Nothing else is certain.’

The Custodians and the Sisters escort them back along the empty golden hallways. Oll senses they are being returned to the Antirooms where they were first held, but it’s impossible to be sure because the grand, intimidating galleries of the Palace all look alike. These auramite halls seem like the same ones they were originally conducted along, but they are interchangeable. Perhaps they are being led back by another route? Perhaps they are being taken somewhere else altogether?

It doesn’t matter. They’re done. Their folly is over. Their captors are no longer prepared to hear them out. Collaboration with the authorities has ceased to be an option, and escape from custody is even less viable. They are closely guarded by the most dangerous beings in the Emperor’s host.

The long companions trudge in silence, cowed and scared. Actae is especially withdrawn. The colour has drained out of her, she is leaning on Katt for support like an invalid, and Katt herself is suffering. The psychic trauma of the appalling Throne Room, and the continued proximity of the spectral nulls, have taken a terrible toll on them both, but Oll fears that the distress-reaction the pair are sharing through their psykanic bond is due far more to this notion of a ‘Dark King’. The revelation of the imminent, final, horrifying stage of Lupercal’s ascent affected Actae profoundly. Oll wishes he could question her about it, but now’s not the time.

There’s never going to be the time. There’s no way out. They crossed the galaxy to face the Master of Mankind and, against all the odds, they reached their destination. But He was out. It’s buffoonery, the punchline to a bad joke, like one of the lesser epics the bards used to sing. The bards, in fealty to Apollo, would perform such tales at the feast-fire, amid the smell of wine and food and burnt offerings. They would select one suitable for the moment: an epic tale of prowess to lift the spirits, a tale of heroic woe for more sombre occasions. Some were comical and light-hearted, strewn with mishaps and blunders, sung to do no more than delight and amuse.

That’s what our odyssey has been, Oll thinks. One of the comical numbers, the farcical ones sung to the strum of a lyre, reciting catalogues of weakness, whimsy, imprudence and inglorious absurdity. A misadventure. That’s all it’s been. A half-baked try with a feeble ending, to make men laugh and shake their heads in disbelief, and pity the foolhardiness of those involved. Their song is over.

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6:ii

An instant away

Even the song of the astrotelepathic choir is beginning to break and falter.

Their urgent pace brings them as close to the foot of the Throne's vast stepped dais as they dare to be. They feel the radiant heat of it. Inside the encircling ring of outward-facing Custodians, wordlessly maintaining their vigil, seniors and apprenti of the Concillium toil to regulate the stabilisation engines arranged around the great dais. The light is fierce. There is a heady stink of ozone and heated metal, and also the reek of some of the universe's less quantifiable properties, which speak of bruised dreams, lacerated hopes, myopic farsight and caustic epiphany. The surging roar of the voiceless choir vibrates Vulkan's teeth and pulses in his blood. He shifts his arm slightly to dull a piercing harmonic issuing from his pauldron.

Seniors of the Concillium hurry over to Vulkan, bow, and present him with data-slates outlining the fresh spike of empyric activity Abidemi spoke of. Their faces, hidden behind the tinted window-slits of their lead-lined gear, are glossy with sweat and prickled with burn-blisters. The plastek surfaces of their data-slates are bubbled and scorched.

'This anomaly is increasing in strength?' Vulkan asks, scanning the data.

The seniors affirm it is.

‘But there is no locus for it? No location or epicentre?’

They confirm that there is not.

Vulkan studies the data again. The anomaly, alarming in itself, is not the only concerning aspect. The Concillium’s inability to determine its epicentre suggests that it is occurring, uniformly, everywhere. But a cursory glance at the metadata framing their observations reveals that nothing seems to possess a verifiable location any more. The Palace Dominions, the expanse of Terra… All seem to have shed their established, mathematised macrostructure, so that all points of reference have been lost and nothing can be correlated to anything else. It suggests the Sanctum’s potent sensoria apparatus have become defective, or overwhelmed.

Or that, somehow, everywhere has become everywhere.

‘Is it possible,’ Vulkan asks, ‘that this anomaly is simply a consequence of the Regent’s incremental decay? I mean, is this anomaly a separate event that is destabilising the function of the Throne, or is it a symptom of the Throne increasingly slipping from the Sigillite’s control?’

They cannot answer that.

Vulkan turns to look at the Throne.

He labours, signs Casryn, half-seen at his side. It is hard to see where Malcador ends and the burning radiance begins. What little Vulkan can perceive of the Sigillite is a blind and blinding neon shape that has been reduced to a mere stick figure.

It is worse than Casryn suggests. Vulkan can see that. All monitoring data indicates that, in the course of the last few, un-trackable minutes, Malcador’s strength has rapidly deteriorated. He appears burned out, gone forever, or at best is on the verge of annihilation. The Golden Throne will shortly be uncontrolled, its mechanisms racing unchecked. An immaterial breach, the implosion of cosmic magnitude that Vulkan’s father spent years holding back, is imminent. Perhaps the anomaly is simply the first indicator of that calamity.

At floor level, another member of the Adnector Concillium collapses. They are succumbing with greater frequency, overwhelmed by the raging power-bleed despite their protective gear, struck dumb or sightless or simply overcome. When they fall, serfs rush in to drag them clear and fetch them to the infirmary. Vulkan has been told that several have simply died.

Fresh adepts, waiting in silent ranks below the sweep of the nearest scissor arch, hurry forward to take their places.

The immateria engines they struggle to maintain cough and sputter, shiver and heave, bleeding liquidised axioms and gusting phlogistonic sparks. The floor around the dais is sooted black, and the backs of Uzkarel and his encircling detachment of Sentinels are dulled with tarnish.

His eyes narrowed against the glare, Vulkan studies the mechanisms of the Throne. Has the time come? He identifies the Talisman of Seven Hammers though he knows precisely where it is. Must he now accept the inevitable and initiate the end of the Imperium? He rehearses the motions and gestures he will need to make in his mind.

Perhaps, he thinks, the Talisman is the last safeguard, not against the immediate and overwhelming foe, but against the catastrophe of a new god, a notion only now brought to his attention but which, he prays, his father and the Sigillite foresaw and have made arrangements to counter.

He wills the Talisman, abominable though it is, to be that safeguard. He needs to believe that Malcador and his father knew of this possibility in advance, and thus prepared an ultimate response. He cannot allow himself to think that it is not, for if it is not, then his father and the Sigillite had no foreknowledge of the threat of the Dark King, and have left nothing with which to fight it.

My lord… Casryn signs.

‘Wait…’ he replies.

The Sigillite is failing, lord.

Vulkan can see it’s true. He feels as though he can actually see Malcador’s agonised soul burning and evaporating inside the luminous husk of his raddled body.

We must supplement and reinforce him…

‘Sigil Protocol–’

Is no longer enough. It cannot sustain him until your father our lord returns. We are an instant from catastrophe.

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6:iii

Close to the city

‘Stay back,’ says Agathe. Phikes needs no encouragement to do so, but Mikhail stays at her side, his old lasrifle steady. She draws her sidearm.

Phikes has brought them to a long block of cells. There is ruination in this part of the black mansion too. The floor is littered with rubble and debris. Some cell doors stand ajar, others closed. Some have been blown off entirely. The line of cells extends as far as she can see in the darkness.

She advances, Mikhail beside her, whether she wants him there or not. Phikes waits behind her, with Mikhail’s squad, and the clearance team that was working the area.

She hears the knocking at once, the gentle rap of knuckles on a cell door. She can’t tell which one it’s coming from. The first cell is open, and empty. The second, its door ajar, is also vacant. The door of the third cell is closed. The knocking is coming from inside.

Agathe glances at Mikhail, then beckons Phikes. He joins them, reluctantly.

‘They were all checked?’ she asks.

He nods.

‘So none are locked?’

‘The squad forced open all that were, mam,’ he whispers.

She moves to the door. The knocking continues. Mikhail puts out his hand, stops her, and then moves in. He kicks the door wide, and goes in, weapon aimed from the shoulder.

The heavy metal door shivers on its hinges. The cell is completely empty. The knocking has stopped.

Agathe looks in over Mikhail’s shoulder. Nothing. No sign of anything that could have been making the noise, no loose pipe or dangling debris stirred by the wind.

The knocking resumes, now coming from a closed door three cells along.

Agathe and Mikhail glance at each other.

‘I told you this,’ Phikes hisses. He’s trembling. ‘The cells are empty. All of them. But the knocking comes from cells where the doors are closed. Even ones that have been checked.’

She strides to the third door down. The knocking from inside is feeble, but distinct. Some forgotten prisoner, left to his fate without food and water when the wardens fled, weakly tapping in the hope that someone will hear.

Impulsively, she knocks back. The knocking inside stops. Then it resumes. She immediately shoulders the cell door open and steps in, laspistol raised.

Empty, but for the rotting remains of an old cot. There are no marks on the inside of the door. Mikhail, grim, tilts his head to her. The knocks are now ringing from another cell a few doors along.

Mikhail moves to it. He takes off his grubby forage cap, balls it in his hand as a makeshift rag to wipe the sweat off his brow, then shakes it out and puts it back on. He raises his foot to kick the door.

The knocking ceases.

He lowers his foot.

It starts again.

He bursts in, covering every corner of the little, dank chamber with his weapon. By the time she joins him, the knocking has begun again, further down the block.

‘Daemon-kind plays tricks with us,’ she says.

‘It was said the black stone had certain properties,’ Mikhail replied. ‘Inmates said it stole their hopes and their woes, like it was feeding on them. That it spoke to them when they slept and–’

‘Enough of that, captain,’ she replies. ‘This isn’t the Blackstone.’

‘As you wish, mam,’ he replies. ‘But the stone is black. Maybe you’re right. Maybe this is a different prison, but built from the same stuff. In which case–’

She strides to the next cell from which the infernal sound is issuing, and simply throws the door wide.

‘Phikes?’ Agathe calls, staring at the revealed emptiness.

‘Mam?’

‘Your team has examined all these cells?’

‘Yes, mam.’

‘And the knocking only comes from cells where the doors are closed?’

‘Yes, mam.’

‘Then I would urge you, Phikes, to use some Vesperi nous.’

‘Mam?’

‘Leave the cell doors open,’ Mikhail growls.

‘Oh,’ says Phikes.

Agathe leads the way down the block. She doesn’t go directly to the source of the knocking, which has begun again six doors along. She simply throws open each closed door in turn until she gets to it.

By the time she does, the knocking has skipped along to another door.

‘Open them all,’ she says.

The teams, wary, join them. They move methodically, opening every cell door so that it stands wide. The elusive taps skip ahead of them, cell-to-cell. As they reach the end of the block, a sequence of five closed doors in a row, it suddenly starts knocking from within all of them at once.

That makes Agathe hesitate. Mikhail, who seems more exasperated than scared, boldly slams the last five open in quick succession.

She is right behind him as he reaches the last one, and sees what he sees when he shoves it open.

It’s not a cell.

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6:iv

The thread

It will be cells, if they're lucky. If they're not, then they are being taken to–

John Grammaticus looks up from his misery and sees that the Chosen One, Hassan, has caught up with them and fallen in step beside the escorted prisoner party. Hassan's expression is bleakly solemn.

'Where are you taking us?' John asks.

'Do not speak,' Raja barks.

John flinches. The Custodians are utterly intimidating, and he is petrified of provoking them. But he doubts he or Oll will ever get another opportunity to talk to one of the Regent's staff. Of all their captors, Hassan had seemed the most reasonable. The most *human*.

'Why wouldn't he listen to us?' John asks quietly. 'He owes me a debt. You heard him say so. Why wouldn't Lord Vulkan–'

'One further word, and I will silence you,' says Companion Raja.

Hassan glances at the Custodian, and raises a hand gently.

'It's all right, Companion,' Hassan says. 'The man is simply afraid.'

Raja glares for a moment, then leads the party onwards. They cross an ornate golden bridge spanning a bottomless ventilation shaft, go through a

towering arch engraved with intertwined angels, and start to make their way along another impossibly long hallway lined with statues. It's one of the Palace's grand processionals, the ceiling so high it is lost in the haze of light. It dwarfs even the gigantic Custodes. There are people here, crowds of nobility and seniors of the Imperial military, servitors and Palace staff, all hurrying somewhere, all afraid. It is the first part of the Palace John's seen that seems properly alive, like the main street of a great city. There is a strained tension in the air, the sound of distant bells, a hush of voices swallowed by the immense space. Everyone on the processional gives the prisoners and their fearsome escort a wide berth. Courtiers and officials glance at them as they pass, their faces full of suspicion and disdain.

'If my Lord Vulkan does owe you his life,' says Hassan as they walk, his voice oddly muted by the volume of the processional, 'then perhaps your positive contribution in the face of this disaster is already done, and was done long before you came to the Palace. Have you considered that? Perhaps he recognises that you have nothing else to offer.'

'I don't think you believe that, Chosen One,' says John.

Hassan doesn't reply, but he glances at the negation crate Sister Vigilator Mozi Dodoma is carrying. In it are some of the possessions confiscated from the long companions at capture, objects that are in themselves hard to explain. There's no way to engineer trust, John realises. He and Oll and the companions are insignificant outsiders, and there's too much about them that raises cause for concern.

They walk a little further. John sees that Oll has suddenly stopped.

'Keep moving, please,' says Hassan. 'Companion Raja will not tolerate–'

'What's that?' Oll asks, pointing.

'Walk!' Raja snarls.

John pushes to Oll's side. 'Stop it,' he whispers. 'Oll, they'll kill you.'

Oll ignores him.

'What is that, Chosen One?' Oll asks. John realises that Oll is staring at one of the golden statues that line the long hallway. The passing foot traffic is making space to move around the suddenly halted party. Oll takes a step towards the statue. Sisters, soft as cobwebs, move to surround him. John sees the flash of their blades being drawn.

'Oll–!' John hisses.

'Look,' Oll says. He points. With his other hand, he rubs his left eyelid,

which seems to have developed a tic.

‘At what?’ asks Hassan.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ John pleads.

‘Look, John!’ Oll repeats. Raja strides over to restrain him.

‘Have we been here before?’ Oll calls out to Hassan.

‘You were escorted this way–’

‘Before that,’ says Oll. ‘Before you captured us. We never made it this far, did we?’

‘You were apprehended near the Hall of Worthies,’ Hassan replies, ‘a considerable distance from here. What does it matter? Get back in line.’

‘It matters, Chosen One, because of that,’ says Oll.

John sees what his friend is pointing at. He catches his breath.

Both Hassan and Raja have noticed what Oll has spotted too. At Raja’s signal, the Sisters step back, allowing Oll, John and Hassan to approach the statue.

There is a loop of red thread tied around its ankle.

‘What is the significance?’ asks Hassan.

‘What, apart from the question of who is randomly tying bits of string to your fixtures and fittings?’ John asks. ‘Should that *be* there?’

‘No,’ admits Hassan.

‘Right,’ John says. ‘We marked our way. You saw the thread we carried. We marked our way as we came because this place is a labyrinth.’

‘What of it?’ asks Raja as he looms behind them.

‘I thought I saw another,’ says Oll. ‘On our way to the Throne Room. I wasn’t sure, and you weren’t about to let us stop. But we’d never been down that hall to tie it. And we’ve never been down this one either, not to leave a clue.’

‘I… I don’t understand,’ says Hassan.

Raja looks to the warrior escort. ‘Stand ready and alert!’ he snarls.

‘Companion Raja does,’ says John to Hassan. ‘The geometry of the Palace is no longer stable. Do you understand what my friend is showing you? The Palace is shifting and recomposing because, Throne help us all, the warp is already inside.’

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6:v

The sound

Rann finds Leod Baldwin in a dark hallway within the bunkers. Fisk Halen is with him, and Kyzo, one of Namahi's outriders.

'What is it?' Rann asks. Baldwin beckons him. They follow the hallway to the end, to a rockcrete chamber, where the walls, floor and ceiling are painted oxide red, probably indicating a gun-box, or perhaps a munition safe. It is dank and empty.

'Kyzo found it,' says Baldwin. 'Sharp ears.'

'Just making sure the chambers were all secure, Lord-Son-Of-Dorn,' says the White Scar. 'I was looking for secret access. Trapdoors. False walls.'

'And?' asks Rann.

'That's how he found it,' says Halen.

'Found what?' asks Rann. The room is simply an empty rockcrete box.

'Listen,' says Baldwin, raising a finger to his lips.

Rann listens. The four men let the silence grow around them. There's nothing, except the distant thump and rumble of battle-brothers elsewhere in the bunker complex prepping defences.

Then he hears it. A sound.

A whisper.

He looks sharply at Baldwin, who nods. No one speaks. Rann strains to hear. A whisper, in the shape of words, but little more than a murmur, like the background hum of circ-systems.

Rann looks around. Soundless, he moves closer to the walls, listening.

‘It’s just ambient noise,’ he says.

‘There are no active systems this end of the works,’ says Halen.

‘Something under us, then,’ says Rann. ‘Pipework. Drainage. Something conducting sound from elsewhere.’

‘It’s a voice,’ says Kyzo.

‘Well, where’s it coming from, then?’ Rann asks. ‘Some weird bounce of acoustics?’

The White Scar points to the back wall of the gun-box.

Rann approaches it. He runs his hands across it. Sheer, thick ferro-concrete, unyielding. He leans in, and presses his ear to the red wall.

It is a voice. Not soft, but far away.

‘What’s on the other side of this?’ he asks.

‘Nothing,’ says Baldwin. ‘This is the northern end of the Hasgard dug-out. The other side of that is solid bedrock.’

‘Nothing could be on the other side,’ says Kyzo. ‘I even went out and circled the structure. This end is both fortified and buried.’

Rann listens again. He can hear the voice still, a steady, calm recitation. He presses close and strains to listen.

‘… concept of *yi bang* was devised to regulate the application of war. This formalised the justification for killing, making it the supreme method of judicial punishment. It could…’

Rann jerks back. He gazes at Baldwin.

‘Then you think so too?’ Baldwin asks. ‘I did. So did Halen.’

‘There’s no way it could be,’ says Rann.

‘Yet it is,’ says Halen. ‘You recognise it too.’

Rann doesn’t answer.

But he would know that voice anywhere. The calm, methodical tones of his lord and father, Rogal Dorn.

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6:vi

That which shouldn’t be

The door opens into a cobbled yard. Agathe stares for a moment, trying to understand what she is seeing. A cobbled courtyard, surrounded by old stone walls, leaning with age and furred with moss and lichen. The edges of tiled roofs and old ironwork gutters. Everything is diffuse grey, as though seen through a mist, even the daylight itself.

But there is no daylight anywhere in the entire span of the Palace Dominions, not even this mournful wash. And the yard does not agree with the architecture of the cell block. From the doorway, she can see that it is wider than block units should allow. It stretches to her left, into what would be the last cell she visited. She would have seen it from in there.

Mikhail jolts back, startled.

Agathe moves past him.

‘Don’t!’ he calls.

But she’s already in the yard. The air is cold and damp and very still, but fresh. It smells nothing like the dank stink inside the black mansion, or the broiled smoke-reek that has been invading their nostrils for the last few hours in the warzone outside.

It is a different place entirely. She breathes in. The air is almost refreshing, though she is aware her inhalation is jagged because she is shaking so badly.

She looks back. She sees the doorway, still a cell doorway, and through it the alarmed faces of Phikes and Mikhail and the clearance teams, and behind them, the black stone cell block they are standing in. But around the door is mouldering grey stone, scabs of lichen, a rising iron drainpipe, an overhang of roof. No sign whatsoever of the cell block's fabric, no sign at all of the black mansion's vast imposing structure.

Mikhail, in the doorway, holds out his hand, urging her to step back. She knows he's right. She has blundered into the impossible, as though she has fallen asleep on her feet and suddenly started to dream. Where she is cannot be. It does not fit the location, or logic, or physics. Yet it is. Perhaps she has finally, after all she has been through, gone mad.

But she's here now. It feels, on a wordless level, as though this was where she was coming to all along, that this has been her destination from the start, somehow inevitable.

Agathe turns and looks around. She takes a few more steps into the yard. Beyond it is a huge sky, a dull, waterlogged grey, fimbriated with blotchy nimbostratus cloud. She can smell imminent rain on the air. Below the wide sky, beyond the little yard, she can see a city. She can see roofs, towers, part of a bridge, the jumbled, unplanned, ancient warren of the streets. The place is vast, and very old. It is built of stone and brick, of tile and timber beams, and every part of it is grey and secretive. There is no sign of life. It looks as though it has stood, suddenly abandoned to slow decay, for centuries. It is drab and derelict, mouldering and silent, and it stretches as far as she can see.

There is something profoundly wrong about it. Not just that it couldn't possibly be here, or coexist in the space occupied by the ransacked prison. The actual place, the cityscape, is wrong. Its lines and perspectives are skewed, uneasily bending distance and form beyond anything that can be explained by the tumbled, leaning and irregular walls. The place has the creeping logic of a slow nightmare. It grows odder and more elongated the longer she looks.

'Marshal?'

Mikhail is beside her. He has stepped into the yard at her side. The tone of

his voice is dull, as though it is being modulated by some distorted acoustics.

‘We shouldn’t be here, marshal,’ he says.

She nods. ‘This shouldn’t be here,’ she says.

‘Marshal, step back with me. We should leave.’

She nods again, but the weird fascination of the place holds her where she is.

‘Marshal?’

‘I think I dreamed of this place once, captain,’ she says.

‘I think I have too,’ he replies. ‘Marshal, please. Come back with me. This place can’t be trusted.’

‘I don’t think anything can be trusted any more,’ she replies.

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6:vii

Speaking the unspoken

Vulkan pauses. He has shouldered great responsibilities for his entire life, the destiny of any primarch-son, but he could never have imagined such a weight as this. The entire world rests upon his shoulders, the fate of the Imperium, of the species itself. Now an additional burden has been added to that weight: the fate of the material cosmos, whether or not the human race is alive to see it.

He can only trust what he knows, and what he knows is that his father made him and his brothers to be architects of creation. Each one a demigod, capable of bearing the very greatest responsibilities, of making the very greatest decisions, of calculating any risk-position, even the fate of reality, and making the best choice. And all of that autonomously, without the guidance or instruction of their father.

He has never felt the encumbrance of his duty so painfully. No matter how many times he has died, he has never fully appreciated the agony and sacrifice of being a primarch until now.

He cannot bring himself to say the words aloud, and it is only right that an unspoken sanction not be voiced.

Commence the work, he tells her, his hands reluctant but agile. *Bring forth the first of the psycho-able candidates, and support and fortify the Sigillite at whatever cost is necessary. I instruct the Unspoken Sanction at this time.*

As you command, she signs.

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6:viii

The last torments of Malcador

Dead.

I thought I was dead.

But instead, I find–

Ragged universes vicing me and crushing me.

Razor-edged realities shredding me down to subatomic meal.

Grand mal spasms in which entire galaxies rise, and spin, and fall in the blink of a single seizure.

Eternity, compressed by hyper-mass forces into a dense nanosecond, and then stretched out like a string, like a thread, by impossible gravities, until it winds around forever and loops back again, through a curving immensity of space and time to meet itself once more, ouroboros, all dimensions and none at all, in one isochronal convolution that is both revelatory and inevitable.

How am I still alive?

The throne is a screaming, undead ghoul, a burning cinder-fleck carried by a river of molten rock. It is bonded to my bones. It is a golden light in my marrow. It is a firestorm billowing the broken fragments of my soul.

It tries to throw me off, to unseat me. It thought it was done with me, that it was free. It bucks and thrashes like a wild auroch to shake me loose. It writhes and whips like a fighting snake to hurl me away, to break my renewed grip, to coil me aside so that it may reverse and sink its fangs into my throat. The pain is nothing now. It is so great that, like time, and the insurmountable effort of remembering my own name, it has looped back upon itself and passed beyond my perception.

I persevere, ignoring the irreparable mutilation of my body, mind and spirit. I persevere, because there is so little left of me, it is somehow easier to focus on the one thing that remains: my duty. I thought I was dead. I thought I was finished. But my fading strength is suddenly reinforced, and I have regained some small measure of control. It is tenuous, and the throne, wailing in dismay, doesn't like it, but it is forced to accept my plenary authority. A snake, it no longer fights, but instead coils around me to constrict, suffocate and pulp.

Weeping tears of dissolved sanity, I ride the throne, like an incandescent chariot, into the yawning byssos of the warp. The bow-wave of rupturing materia bursts around me, drenching me in ice-cold dreams, a psychedelic void of immateria expanding below. The keening Neverborn pursue me still, a rushing maelstrom, an infernal wild hunt, furled in cloaks of black hatred and hauberks wrought of pure spite. Their leering faces are daubed with warpaint made of stellar ash and dusted white with a powder of crushed time. On their breath, I can smell the dismay of toppled empires and the outrage of extinguished species. They close like jackals to bring me down and finish me.

I am just a precatory thing now, bone, blood and tissue dissolved, a perdurable sentience held together by memory alone, an acheiropoieton wrought as an effigy of my former life. Nothing human remains of me except my will.

I exert it.

The throne protests. It tries to break my grip. Chugging and rasping like a damaged turbine jammed at full power, it bites at my fingers and yearns to submit to the madness. It is so swollen with exoplanar energy, it wants to

split, and spill, and have done. I persevere.

For there *is* no now. Or rather, there is *only* now. The isochronal instant. All of the pasts, all of the presents, all of the futures, even the grim darknesses of far futures, are bound up into one simultaneous solid, a spool of time wrapped into one tight ball, with no end and no beginning to unpick, blown like a loose feather on the currents of the warp. That is my anchor. Not a still point in time, but all time stilled. I lock myself and the raving throne to that tiny mote of infinite stillness and calm the machine's frenetic mania.

This is my one task. Maintain stability. I must harness the monstrous violence of the throne, hold back the warp flooding the webway, and *maintain stability*. When I took this seat, I wondered how long I would last, but there is no *long* or *longer*, for there is no duration. The collapse of linear time is my only asset. I died the moment I sat down, but I am not yet dead. Through force of will, I hold myself on that brink of now, the never-ending moment.

Through a mist of blood and petrified light, I see the now in my physical vicinity. The throne room floor scorching black. The apprenti stroking out and collapsing across the machines they tend, their dreams and hopes and intentions spilling out of their corpses and smearing the floor as they are dragged away and replaced. I see Vulkan making ghastly, Procrustean decisions in an effort to support me. I can taste Vulkan's pain, his regret, his reluctance, his revulsion at the commands he is being forced to give in order to strengthen me and prolong my doom. His actions, which will haunt him for the rest of his life, are sustaining me, nourishing me, long past any definition of mortality.

Poor Vulkan's efforts have bought me a little more of *now*.

And in that *now*, I begin to see all the other nows too. I can see that the stakes have changed. There is a new factor, a new *now* that was before merely an *if*. The now of Horus triumphant, the now of Lupercal as transcendent owner of the night, is cracking and distorting, fusing and bubbling, no longer a certainty. It is caught in the light of a brighter filament of the isochronous totality: a blinding light, white, lethal and pure, cast by a single rising star, a fierce and steadfast thing that is too furious to behold directly. It is the star I saw before, as my sight failed and death came for me. It is the Emperor, empowered by the warp, the brightest thing in the

galaxy. His light is everywhere.

It spills across all other nows. It bleaches the pulped battlescapes of Terra into whiteness. It catches the lines of Valdor's wargear, and glints on the harder edges of his too-transformed thoughts. It slowly eats away the shadow under the red wall where Dorn shelters, talking to himself. It burns the soul of Sanguinius, though he is buried deep in a lightless crypt.

It is the light that casts the shadow of the Dark King.

I try to speak. I still cannot. The steadfast light is everywhere, permeating every now that was and could be. In one, ancient, inhuman creatures pause in their work, look up from half-built devices of intricate complexity, and shield their eyes against the rising glare. They start to wail.

In another, the world is without form, and void, and darkness moves upon the face of the deep, and the steadfast light says let me be, and it is.

In another, and another, and an infinity of others, there is only light, and its anthesis has burned everything away with its unholy intensity.

Only in one now, a gloomy and decaying now, does the light not penetrate. It is a realm of shadows and candlelight, a grim darkness of ruin and disrepair, where men are shackled by ancient duties, imperfectly remembered but obsessively performed, where lamp-glow flickers off the flaking gilt of past glories and the faded majesty of once-proud emblems, where the functions of machines and the purposes of humans are forgotten, or misunderstood, and have been reduced to rote, and ceremony, and rite, a now where everything, including the meaning of life, has become no more than rehearsed tradition and meaningless ritual.

I cannot speak. I cannot block the light. I can only seize upon these unexpected scraps of suddenly renewed strength to expend my fraying will and guide the few who might still hear me. They are almost out of reach now, and I have all but forgotten their names.

Yet still I strive to call to them, to steer them, in the hope that one of them will listen and one of them, just one, will be enough.

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6:ix

At the end of the Via Aquila

On the Via Aquila, she follows the voice calling her name.

The voice is soft, but not a whisper. It is more a shout, a desperate cry, but one heard from very far away.

Keeler walks at the head of the column, leading the way, her pace determined and strong despite her exhaustion. The river of souls, now so many millions strong its size is impossible to calculate, follows at her heels. Refugees: the lost, the wounded, the surviving, the dispossessed, the broken and displaced citizens of the once-proud Palace who have nowhere to go except away from death, and no one to follow except her. Dust rises from their multitude, from the tread of bloody, bandaged feet, from filthy stilts and walking platforms, from the creaking barrows and carts piled with their meagre possessions. Predatory horror chases them, gnawing at the rear of the column, picking off the injured and the stragglers. The smoke and howl of war pile like menacing cliffs on either side of them, as though they are a slow torrent streaming down a dark ravine.

The members of the conclave, Eild, Wereft, Perevanna, Tang, a thousand others, all so weary they are mentally vacant, keep the river flowing. They

carry the sick and injured, pick up those who falter and fall, break up fractious disputes and soothe fears, distribute what medicae reserves are available, and walk as outrider squads, lugging flamers, to guard the flanks. They watch for daemon-signs, and root them out, mercilessly, with fire and blade, wherever they hatch in the teeming cavalcade. The dead are left behind at the roadside, in the dust.

The river flows. People carry recovered banners of the Imperialis and the aquila, company flags of the Excertus, and standards of the loyal Legions, and hold them high, dusty and swaying. People are joining in song, voices raised to steady their spirits, mouths moving mechanically, intoning words they have never learned to tunes they did not realise they knew, old hymns, archaic plainsong chants, faded songs of praise and dusty myths. They clutch their purity tags for comfort, lean on their staves and walking sticks and each other, and give voice.

Keeler hears the latest, the ragged words lifting en masse from the pitiful ranks behind her like a flight of birds released into the sky.

She sings along, though she's never learned the words either.

It's a pilgrimage. No one's used the word, but they all feel it. It started as an exodus, a mass flight from the sundered realm of their homeland, but it has become a pilgrimage. An act of faith, devotion and endurance that is more than simple survival and escape. A journey, though no one really knows to where. If this march has a destination, then no one comprehends it.

Except her. Perhaps. They believe Keeler knows, all of them, every one of the millions, just as they believed she was something more than just another survivor. Word has spread of her purpose and intent, in the same uncanny way it spread to begin with. Word of her. Word of her leadership. Word of her faith. Faith in her faith. They follow her because she seems to know where she's going, though she has said nothing of a destination apart from the mantra 'north'. They trust in her intent, but that intent is expressed only by her determination to keep walking, to put one foot in front of the other; to keep walking as though there is something or someone waiting for them.

Keeler doesn't explain because she can't explain. The summoning voice is very clear to her, though its meaning is inscrutable. It's become clearer and more fixed since High Lord Nemo Zhi-Meng, the choirmaster of the Telepathica, joined them. He trudges at her side, his hand on her arm for

support. Since he came to them, the voice has gained some clarity. Keeler believes this is because of his psionic gifts, acting like a lens allowing her to see better. The voice has become a light to her, a shining, steadfast star far ahead that only she can behold. Zhi-Meng can't see it, even with blindsight or mindsight, but he enables her. The star is too bright for her to look at directly. Whenever she tries, nausea sweeps her again and dizzies her to the brink of unconsciousness.

But the star is there, as though it's been there forever, and ever will be.

The road has no end. Keeler has stopped being amazed or scared by that. The Via Aquila simply extends forever, stretch after pummelled stretch, with a haze of high ruins on either side. The further they walk, the further away any end seems to get, progressing further and further into infinity, just as the lone star that marks that end, the star only she can see, retreats ahead of them.

She has made her peace with that. Everything has run out, time and hope, day and night, direction and meaning. Everything has run out except the road and the voice. There is only now. There is only the next step and the next. They are simply here. As she told Leeta Tang, 'We were there.' Only the tense of that statement has changed, for tense defines time, and time has unravelled.

Keeler knows that something will change at some point. The forces of Chaos, forever in flux as is their nature, will interrupt and overtake them eventually. It's inevitable.

But when it comes, it still takes her by surprise.

She sees figures on the road ahead, dim forms in the blowing dust. There are many of them, and their numbers increase ominously, spilling out of the burning ruins to either side of the processional.

Keeler raises her hand and brings the pilgrimage to a stop. Slowly, the vast river halts, the cessation spreading back down the vast, dusty line. The singing dies away, and is replaced by a breathless hush broken only by the moans of the injured, the sobbing of the terrified, and the plaintive wail of carried infants. Zhi-Meng's grip tightens on her arm.

'We are damned now, Euphrati,' he says.

She doesn't answer. She nods to Eild, and he steps up to steady the old lord as she lets go of his arm. She can see the fear in Eild's eyes.

She starts to walk forward, ahead of the waiting masses. Two of the

conclave fall in on either side of her as lieutenants: Wereft, clutching his half-filled flamer, and the soldier, Katsuhiro, with his rifle and the child clasped to his breast.

‘What are we doing?’ Wereft whispers as they walk forward.

She doesn’t have an answer for him. There is no possibility of negotiation. She wonders if the light and voice will protect her, but she doubts it. Perhaps *this* is the destination. Perhaps this is the end towards which the pilgrimage has been moving. Whatever it is, she will face it, and look it in the eye. She refuses to believe that the voice has led her this far, to this end, only for that end to be death.

Except it is.

The figures on the road ahead, and there are now scores of them, are Astartes in filthy plate that was once sea-green, but now looks almost black. They stand, weapons rested, watching her approach with leisurely curiosity, perhaps puzzled by the vast mass of people behind her.

Keeler knows their marks, the distinctive topknot plumes that many of them wear. Sons of Horus, the XVI Legion that was.

Their leader, a huge brute, a captain from the shreds of insignia still visible on his plate, regards her advance with amusement. He walks forward to meet her, unafraid. What are these impoverished wretches to him, despite their numbers? Just more tributes to the Warmaster, apparently offering themselves up without resistance because they know their end has come.

Keeler wonders if she knows him; if she knew him back in the days, now so long ago, when she was a guest aboard his master’s warship. Did she speak to him? Did she record his image? Was he kind to her, courteous, as they all were then, when they were Luna Wolves?

‘Keeler,’ she says, as though that is enough. She comes to a halt, Wereft and the soldier either side of her. The captain halts too, ten metres away. He studies her. His men, his monsters, wait, watching, entertained.

‘Selgar Dorgaddon,’ he replies, as though this is some game he is willing to go along with. ‘Captain, Tenth Company.’

His voice is the boom of a war-horn squeezed down into human words. He carries a greatsword that is as long as she is tall. He rests it, casually, across one pauldron, a soldier breaking for a rest mid-march. A venomous aura surrounds him, leaking darkness into the air like ink into blotting paper. He is grotesque and dreadful, terror manifest.

She *does* know him. Dorgaddon. A line trooper in her time, now elevated to command rank to fill the bites that war has taken from their Legion. She could not have recalled his forename. He was kind. They all were, once.

She knows no fear. She is filled with a sudden and acute pity for him, to see him at once elevated and destroyed. Dorgaddon is proud of what he is, his rank, his power, his status, and that arrogance bleeds out of him like heat. But he is ruined. His proud plate seems to fester and blister. His face is a mask of scarification, the flesh pale and sickly, dotted with sores and tumours. She sees, for a second, his real self, the ghost of the kind Wolf he once was. It seems to peer out of the thorny knots of his dark armour at her. She remembers an image – *the* image – of another Luna Wolf that she captured in the nightmare tunnels of the Whisperheads on Sixty-Three-Nineteen. Xavyer Jubal, sergeant of Hellebore Tactical, the first known Astartes to fall. This was before even Horus Lupercal had succumbed; the start of the slide, the trigger of her crippling trauma and depression, the seed of what became her faith. Jubal was not human by the time her picter fixed on him, but later, in the horror of the image she had gathered, his screaming phantom had been visible, like some echo or double exposure.

She can see it again here. She can see the anguished spectre of Selgar Dorgaddon trying to claw free of the thing that Selgar Dorgaddon has become.

‘We are non-combatants, Captain Dorgaddon,’ she says.

‘You carry the emblems of the False Emperor,’ he replies.

It’s true. They do. There’s no hiding it.

‘Captain, if there is a shred of–’

‘O-ho, there is not,’ Dorgaddon rumbles. ‘You are flesh. You are *of Him*. You are blood offerings for our gods.’

Keeler begins to tremble. She sees that the faint ghost of Selgar Dorgaddon, barely visible now, has started to weep.

‘Do not ask for mercy from those who have none to give,’ says Dorgaddon. Each word resounds like the thump of a battering ram. Casually, he gestures to his waiting company.

Equally as casual, and smiling, they heft up their weapons and start to prowl forwards, deciding who to kill first.

They are spoiled for choice.

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6:x

From the blood of his brothers

Loken wades on through the blood.

The last time he was here, an eternity ago, he was with Tarik. They were slipping back along the vast service tunnels running the length of the bilges after Loken's induction into the warrior lodge. Loken had been surprised to find himself joining that clandestine society, but it had not been the wicked secret he had suspected. It had been pure then, a true fraternity where men could gather, not by rank, but by brotherhood, and speak their minds. Such a body now seems innocent to him: the invisible lodge of the Luna Wolves, like all the orders and structures of the Legion, and the Legion itself, has been corrupted and soiled by the agency of Chaos. Though innocent in itself, the lodge had been one of the main conduits through which the taint had spread.

He remembers Torgaddon's exuberance at his change of heart. They had walked this way, joking, free. Tarik had run to leap and slap an overhead pipe, a playful game; Loken had followed suit, and done better.

How painfully long ago that seems.

He tries not to think about it because he knows the cunning darkness will

play games with him. He knows it will pick at the scabs of his memories and melancholies, and conjure very particular phantoms and nightmares to spite him. He expects it to rise in the form of Tarik Torgaddon, or Little Horus, or Nero Vipus, taunting him with their faces. He imagines the silt and debris he scuffs with his feet beneath the surface of the pool to be a litter of lodge medals, hundreds and hundreds of them, like pebbles on a beach, placed there to twist the knife of recollection and longing. That fine fraternity can never be restored.

The faces can, though. Loken has seen that horror too many times. Dead faces, exhumed by the warp, and worn to torment and distress; dead faces speaking with dead voices. He waits for them. He waits for the trick. If not Tarik or Nero, then Udon, the brave brother whose death brought Loken into the fold of the lodge. Or Jubal. Yes, Jubal. Poor, damned Jubal of Hellebore Tactical, the first to fall, the first to be possessed, the first to demonstrate to Loken that there was more truth in creation than he cared to know.

That would be the way of the warp, typical of its tailored cruelty. Xavyer Jubal, raised up from the secret places of the dead to haunt him.

It's just your mind playing tricks, he tells himself. That's how it does it. It eats at you, and turns your own imagination into a weapon. It weakens you with dark notions and ugly daydreams before it springs to make its kill.

As if on cue, a voice calls his name.

'There's no one there,' Loken says. 'No one I want to meet.'

It whispers his name again.

He shakes it off, but he knows it. The Sigillite. The mind-voice that chose him, and directed him, and issued him his combat instructions. But that voice has been quiet for a long time.

So that's its game, its chosen trick. Of course. How could he not trust the voice of the Sigillite?

'It's not you, old man,' he whispers.

In the midst of chaos, I found there was, within me, an invincible calm, the voice murmurs. But it's not a voice. It's not words. It's more of a sign, a symbol, a semantic condensation that contains the meaning of those words, but which has suddenly been implanted in his mind, like a sigil.

Loken pauses, blood sloshing around his shins. For an instant, he thinks he sees something ahead of him. Another sigil, another compressed packet of

meaning, that suggests the figure of a crooked and hooded figure, and the sense of urgent beckoning. Does it want him to hurry and catch up, or is it warning him not to stay where he is?

Either way, it can only be a trick, surely? Loken raises his blade.

But the figure, the sigil, is already gone. Then he hears another voice, quite different from the first. It is a real voice, speaking actual words. It is muttering behind him.

‘I am the one who walks behind you. I am the footsteps at your back. I am the man beside you. I am all around you.’

Loken wheels, revving his blade. The lake of blood is frothing and churning, seething like a whirlpool. Something begins to rise out of the tumult to face him.

‘Look out,’ it cackles. ***‘Samus is here.’***

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6:xi

Within the walls

‘Get them to the Antirooms! Now!’ Hassan yells. His cry triggers alarm in the crowds passing along the processional around them.

‘Listen to me–’ Oll protests.

‘I’ve listened!’ Hassan replies. ‘And I’ve understood, believe me. I must take this to Lord Vulkan without delay.’

He stares at the loop of thread for another moment, then looks at Raja.

‘Get them put away, Companion,’ he orders. ‘Secure them in the Antirooms, now, while this can be assessed.’

Raja grabs Oll’s arm so hard it hurts. So hard, in fact, that the Custodian’s superhuman power tears Oll’s arm off and sprays the wall with arterial blood.

Or that’s how it seems. Oll’s wrong, of course. The confusion is so sudden, so complete, that he is utterly bewildered. Ios Raja *is* gripping his arm, painfully, but his arm is still intact. Blood has hosed the golden wall from a different source. It happens again, a jet of blood drenching the nearby wall and speckling the statue. It’s falling like drizzle. Aerosolised, it’s a fine mist in the air.

Oll tries to rationalise what he’s seeing.

Then people start to fall down. Panic ignites through the crowds around them. People start screaming. People start to run.

Two Sisters sprawl dead on the marble floor. They have been destroyed by lacerating wounds. Another thumps against the wall, and slides down it, her vratine wargear soaked in gore. One of the Custodes staggers, suddenly missing a head. Blood is everywhere. So is uproar.

Bolters suddenly start to fire, bludgeoning the air with their deafening report. Flinching, Oll looks around wildly. The processional is under attack. The tumult is so abrupt, so total, it’s overwhelming. It’s erupting all around him. Noise. Light. Blood. Moving shapes. Things happening faster than his eyes can follow, or outside the scope of his senses.

Then he glimpses the first of the traitors. The black, taloned shade of a half-feral Night Lord, briefly visible like a subliminal image.

There are others. They’re everywhere. Dozens of them. They are tearing through the scattering crowds, leaving bodies in their wake. They move like darts of smoke, like the flicker of leaf-shadow in sunlight, using sly tricks of combat-cloaking and metachrosis to appear and disappear.

Traitor Astartes, the rapacious VIII.

The enemy has breached the final fortress.

Pandemonium descends. The processional is suddenly a mindless stampede of people, fleeing, tripping, screaming. People crash into him, knocking him aside in their headlong flight to escape.

The traitors have not come alone. Neverborn phantasmata begin to ooze from the processional walls, blistering the auramite with their exoplanar substance, pouncing and striking, gibbering and gleeful. The air suddenly stinks of viscera, of fyceline, of stagnant water, of the most blighted and shunned edges of the cosmos. People shriek and scatter in their hundreds. Some are crushed underfoot. Some just fall, and cover their heads with their hands, in awful, childlike postures of defence.

The only thing Oll can think, the worst thing, is that no alarms are ringing.

Raja is no longer gripping his arm. The Companion, raging, has impaled a Night Lord to the wall with his spear. Two others are on his back, like wolves on a lion, flaying the plate from his shoulders and shredding his flesh.

Oll backs away. He can’t tear his eyes away from the brutal spectacle that

is undoubtedly Ios Raja's last stand. Stray shots rip past him. A golden statue topples, and crashes to the floor, crushing three courtiers and a servitor. Something inside the wall, something seeping through it, has pushed it over–

Somehow, he gathers his wits. He turns, grabs hold of Zybes, and tries to push through the swirling mob.

'Move! *Move!*' he yells through the crowd at the others, hauling Zybes towards them. Zybes is catatonic. The long companions are similarly transfixed, bewildered, jostled by the people fleeing around them. Oll yells at them again, trying to snap them out of their uncomprehending daze. The floor is slick underfoot. He has to flinch and dodge. Lethal things, visible and invisible, flash and rip through the churning crowds around him. Blades, claws, impacts, mass-reactive shots, thrashing bodies. In the space of seconds, the entire processional has become a riot of terror.

They have to get clear. They have to find shelter. This is transhuman warfare, daemonic havoc. No human should ever have to witness it first-hand, and no human being can get caught up in it and survive. He and his companions couldn't participate even if they wanted to.

But it's also a chance, a chance to–

A Night Lord rears up in front of him, power claws raised to shred him.

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6:xii

Fragments (now we fall)

Sometimes a blade is so sharp, a blow so swift and sudden, a wound so deep, that a body does not feel it go in, and only registers that it’s dying when it is already dead. Sometimes a wound is so instant and lethal, slicing through the chambers of the heart, that when a body falls dead, slain upon the moment, there is scarcely a mark on the outside to show the cause.

Around the monolithic walls of the Delphic Battlements, fire and fury increase their stranglehold. Mass war, siege war, rages at a frenzied pitch even greater than before. The walls still resist. But that resistance, like the fire and fury that the enemy throws against them to bring them down, is futile.

For the swift blow, unseen, has already landed, and the chambers of the heart are sliced through.

Within the Sanctum Imperialis, which has withstood all assault for seven long months, and now a frozen eternity too, wounds are inflicted. In different zones and areas, deep in the core and far from the fighting on the walls, the lights begin to go out.

At the Marnix Confluence, Nassir Amit looks over to see Hemheda Khan step forward from the front of his waiting ranks.

‘Did you hear that, brother?’ he calls across to Amit.

Amit did. Amit isn’t sure of the cause or source, but he heard something. He leaves his place at the front of Denial 963 and walks across to Hemheda.

‘A door closing somewhere,’ he says. ‘A hatch. Securement is underway–’

‘No, Angel-son,’ Hemheda replies. The White Scar tilts his head, listening. ‘Not that.’

‘Why have you broken position?’ Vexillary Roch asks, striding across the empty concourse to reach them. ‘Captain? Khan?’

‘A sound, Vexillary,’ says Amit.

‘A sound?’

‘A thump or boom.’

‘From where?’ Roch asks.

‘It was distant, an echo,’ says Amit. He starts to point at the mouth of the Western Mass Passageway. But Hemheda Khan is pointing across the concourse towards the yawning maw of the Kylon Processional.

‘Western Mass, surely?’ Amit says.

‘Definitely Kylon,’ Hemheda replies. ‘From the east.’

‘There have been no reports or alerts,’ Roch replies. He cues his system to display advisories, and turns to look at Western Mass, then Kylon.

‘A thump, you say?’ he asks.

‘Distant, yes–’ Amit begins.

‘Gunfire,’ says Hemheda. ‘It was gunfire. A quick burst.’

‘Was it?’ Roch asks Amit.

‘I cannot say for sure,’ says Amit. ‘I thought a hatch closing–’

‘There!’ Hemheda says. He looks towards Kylon again. ‘You heard it that time?’

‘I did,’ replies Roch. The sound was very distant. A thumping echo, cut off.

‘It could be gunfire…’ Amit says quietly. No alarms have gone off, no sirens. Weapon discharge of any kind within the Sanctum would have triggered an immediate status warning. An exchange of fire in the interior could only happen if the Delphic had been penetrated, and any breach of the enceinte could not have occurred undetected.

But Tamos Roch is an Imperial Fist, and a veteran practitioner of

siegecraft. He knows that even a false track should not be dismissed. His father taught him that.

‘Denial companies to ready order!’ he calls out. The four companies straighten and bring weapons up in one fluid ripple of plasteel. Roch looks at Amit and Hemheda.

‘Get auspex reads on both approaches,’ he says. ‘Ranged scans, motion detection.’

They nod. Roch turns aside, and starts to raise Hegemon Command on the vox for confirmation.

Hemheda Khan takes three of his men towards the mouth of the Kylon Processional. Amit and Lamirus move towards the entrance of the Western Mass Passageway.

The passageway, vast in scale, stretches before them. It is empty. Its wall lamps, regularly spaced, track away into the distance, filling the vast tunnel with a sickly amber glow. They can detect a breeze, the soft, stale respiration of the Sanctum’s climate system gusting along this primary artery.

Lamirus begins an auspex scan, using his own device and drawing data from the passageway’s sensor network.

‘Nothing,’ he says.

‘Repeat it,’ Amit replies, staring into the distance.

‘No, I mean nothing,’ Lamirus replies. ‘I should be getting heat-reads from the power trunking and the light. And a bounce off the sub-reactor at Mytheme.’

‘Check your scan range,’ says Amit.

‘I’ve checked it.’

‘Check directional–’

‘Directional is… It’s spinning. No fix.’

Amit can suddenly taste blood in his mouth. Blood and sudden anger. He turns to snatch the auspex away and do it himself.

A thick, solid noise echoes along the vast tunnel.

‘Gunfire,’ says Lamirus.

There was no mistaking it that time. No doubt at all.

It was the sound of mass-reactive shots.

At the Onopion Cross overwatch, Major Franna Bizet of the Litrium 16th

Excertus rises slowly to her feet from behind her crew-served rotary cannon. Around her, her squad is resting, drinking soup.

Bizet steps past the planted feet of the cannon's tripod, and past the line of ballistic sacking. She stares into the distance, down the length of Borealis Conduit.

'What is it, major?' her adjutant asks, putting his meal-can down.

'Quiet,' she hisses, squinting down the tunnel.

The light rigs at the very far end go out. Then, one by one, the lighting arrays shut down in series along the conduit's length, as though the darkness is stepping steadily towards her.

In the Hegemon Command Rotunda, Sidozie calls out her name above the chatter of voices and crackling vox-transmissions.

Sandrine Icaro tears her attention away from the Delphic displays and the grim projections their hololiths reveal, and crosses to his station.

'What?' she asks him.

The Chosen gestures to his board. He is projecting a layered render of the Inner Sanctum for some reason, core areas very far from the Delphic.

'A series of power faults is being registered,' he says.

Icaro looks at the projection. Several blocks are showing as red, indicating an interruption of main power. At first, this doesn't surprise her. The War Court has authorised power-down in multiple layers of the Sanctum to maintain supply to the Delphic. Non-essential systems are being shut down throughout the core. But she doesn't remember these areas being on the authorised list.

Another red block lights up.

'Did you approve these shutdowns?' she asks.

Sidozie shakes his head. 'No, mam. I checked. These zones are not on any mandated register. I presume they are malfunctions. Conduits burned out by over-stress, perhaps, or a failure at some of the tertiary generators.'

'All at once?' she asks.

'Cascades happen when power blows,' he says.

'Contact the section adepts directly,' she says. 'Locate the cause, and get it fixed. I want to know why we've got half a dozen local blackouts in the core and–'

She stops short. It isn't half a dozen. On Sidozie's display, the ominous

blocks of red are beginning to breed and multiply across the inner core, like a mosaic slotting together.

They walk slowly in the darkness, weapons raised. Sartak flexes his grip on the haft of his war-axe. He can't see Honfler, but he knows the praetor-captain has his sword raised, because the blade keeps catching the light from the open postern.

The hatch seems so far away. Further than it was before.

The darkness is horrifically, unnaturally thick. It clings to them. Sartak can feel the space of it, the size of it. He can feel a cold wind on his back, a clammy stirring of the air flowing down the Martian Approaches.

Which are not, he is convinced, the Martian Approaches any more.

'Keep moving,' Honfler whispers. His voice seems muffled and very far away, though he is right there at Sartak's side. 'Another few steps…'

The darkness around them seems to be crawling, moving. Sartak tries to see what's in it, but there's nothing to see. Apart from the light of the doorway, he is blind.

And that doorway doesn't seem to be getting any closer.

'Another few steps,' Honfler breathes.

'Just keep up with me, son-of-Dorn,' Sartak replies.

It's cold. Colder than the wastes of Fenris. Sartak can feel his breath in the air, but he can't see it. He keeps thinking he can hear laughter. Laughter in the darkness, far away, chuckles of amusement and cruel mirth from different sources.

Show yourselves, he thinks. *Show me your damn faces and I'll split your laughter in two.*

There's something behind them. He knows it. There's something behind them, laughing at them in the blackness. Something's following them. Something. Many things. They are laughing; little, distant voices laughing, but it's muffled and faint, as though the laughter is being stifled so as not to spoil the surprise.

Why won't the doorway come any closer?

'Keep going,' whispers Honfler. The soft laughter mocks him.

Just a few steps. Just a few more steps and they can slam that postern hatch behind them and shut the darkness out.

A sound behind him. Something moving. Was it a footstep?

Was it something slithering across the rockcrete on its scaled belly?

Don’t look back, he tells himself. Keep going. Just a few more steps. Keep going, keep ready. Keep that axe steady to strike. Don’t look back. We are almost there.

Don’t look back.

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6:xiii

Feast of raptors

The air folds, buckles. The blue-and-brass monster, visibly crumpled, is hurled away from him. It hits the far wall and leaves a bloody dent.

Oll sees the witch, one hand raised. She did that. How many more jolts of psychokinetic force does she have left in her? Oll realises that if Actae can summon enough to put down a Night Lord, she is no longer being suppressed by the Sisters.

Which means that many of the Sisters must already be dead.

‘Ollanius!’ Actae yells. She yells using Katt’s mouth, but Oll knows it’s her. Katt, clammy and swaying, is reeling from the recoil of Actae’s mental discharge, which she has experienced first-hand through the link they share. She is like a flesh appendage to Actae’s form. Wild-eyed, both Katt and Actae look more like the witch of the Cyclades he once knew than ever before.

‘Go, go!’ Oll shouts. ‘Get them out! That way!’

Actae nods, and starts to herd the companions through the stampede. She does so without finesse, seizing their minds. Katt just goes with her. Krank too. Graft leads the way. Leetu, either of his own volition or in response to

her mental command, starts shielding Katt and Actae with his armoured body, bringing up the rear.

Zybes finally starts to run too. Oll keeps a tight hold of Zybes' arm to steer him through the press of screaming people, and finally catches up with the others. Are they all, by some miracle, still alive?

Where's John?

'Grammaticus!'

John has gone back. Like an idiot. Oll spots him weaving his way through the moving crush.

There's no sign of the Chosen One, Hassan. Oll's sure the man is dead already. There is a litter of bodies everywhere he looks. Sister Vigilator Dodoma is definitely dead. Something has gutted her. The duralloy negation crate she was carrying is upturned on the floor beside her. That's what John's gone back for. John grabs it, hauls it up. Oll can see him think of grabbing Dodoma's sword too.

You bloody idiot, it's far too heavy–

Grammaticus has figured that out for himself. Clutching the crate, he starts to run back to join them, barging past people trying to flee. A War Court senior beside him suddenly explodes as a mass-reactive strikes him.

'John!'

Leetu pushes past Oll. He has no weapons, but he clamps his helmet back on as he leaps to John's aid. Something part-vine, part-creeper, part-serpent writhes out of the floor and lashes itself around John's right leg, tripping him onto his face. He falls so hard, the wind is knocked out of him. A Raptor lands beside him in a crouch, holds the squirming man down with one hand, and raises its claws.

Leetu slams into it. They roll, entangled. Leetu springs up first, the Raptor a split second later. It swings for him. Oll can almost hear its hooked claws cutting the air. Leetu dodges, then headbutts the traitor in the face. The Raptor shudders backwards, visor dented by the blunt armour of Leetu's brow. Leetu lunges and grabs the Night Lord by the throat. He smashes it face first into the wall with such force the monster's helm compresses and cracks.

Leetu rips the Raptor's hawk-billed combat knife off its hip, and casts the body aside. He turns to John and starts to hack at the flesh of the whipping tendrils entwining John's leg. Putrid sap spurts. John is struggling

frantically, risking losing fingers to Leetu's blade by trying to tear the tendrils off himself.

'Let me do it, Grammaticus!' Leetu growls.

The negation crate beside John slides a little way sideways. The floor under them, and all around, is starting to sag. Fleeing citizens sprawl, and begin to slide down the floor's sudden slope. Whatever the repellent tendrils belong to, it is rising through the ground beneath the processional, collapsing materia like mud as it burrows into reality. More tendrils, some far larger than the ones that hold John, sprout into the air around them through the widening fissures in the marble. One seizes a passing adjutant and rips her off her feet.

John cries out. He can see over Leetu's shoulder. Two more Raptors, gleaming purple phantoms trailing ragged cloaks like rotten wings, are rushing in behind him. Leetu starts to turn.

He won't be fast enough.

At Oll's side, Katt retches in pain as Actae looses another jolt of psycho-telekine power. The Raptors tumble backwards in unison, cast head-over-heels like wildly thrown dice.

Leetu chops the last of the Neverborn tendrils away, freeing John's leg. Daemon sap has all but melted the blade of the borrowed knife. Leetu tosses it away. He picks up both John and the crate.

'Come on!' Oll yells.

Leetu starts to run with the crowd, the crate under his arm, Grammaticus slung unceremoniously over his shoulder. The floor behind him caves in entirely. People fall, screeching. Some oozing atrocity begins to bulge out of the ground.

'Run!' Oll commands. The long companions obey. Running is the only sane option. Actae is stumbling, having expended more effort than she can afford. Katt, weeping with empathic strain and close to collapse herself, manages to hold her upright. Oll helps her, wincing involuntarily as he takes hold of the witch. Fierce psykanic residue is radiating out of her skin and bone, and touching her body is like touching molten nightmare. He does it anyway, keeping the tall, swaying woman on her feet. His eyelid twitches madly.

They flee. There's no looking back. They flee with those portions of the crowd that are making their escape. Behind them, the processional becomes

a hellish spectacle of Neverborn butchery.

The long companions run, headlong, chased by the echoes of screams and maniacal laughter. Oll knows it's not just echoes pursuing them.

And he knows there is no 'away' to escape to. The Archenemy is inside the Sanctum. Nowhere is safe. They could be running towards danger as fast as they leave it behind. They are unarmed. They are outclassed.

All they can do is run. As far and as fast as they can.

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6:xiv

Those who are about to die

There’s no point running. Keeler closes her eyes. Captain Dorgaddon has chosen her as his first offering. She hears his heavy footsteps crunch across the glass-littered surface of the Via Aquila. He stops in front of her.

She waits for her end with what she hopes is a measure of dignity. She takes what she believes will be her final breath.

There is a heavy, sickening impact.

She feels the air rock, a concussion forcing her backwards. She hears a gasping, gurgling sound.

She opens her eyes. Dorgaddon is dying, sprawled before her, clawing feebly at a wound that has opened his neck and split his torso.

A huge figure, plated in black, stands over him, a gleaming sword in its fist, its back towards Keeler and her cowering lieutenants.

The warrior faces the startled, outraged ranks of Tenth Company, Sons of Horus. He takes a step forward, then another, flexing his grip on the immense war-sword. Blood drips from it. He touches the flat of the blade to his forehead as some kind of salute.

‘He’s done,’ says Sigismund. ‘Who’s next?’

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6:xv

First-lost

‘You are dead,’ says Sanguinius carefully. Instinct is telling him to snarl out an accusation of trickery and use the sword in his hands. But something else, something beyond reason, is convincing him that what he is seeing is real. The rows of stone caskets, draped in cloth, the single candle-flame almost drowned by the weight of the chamber’s shadows.

The armoured figure.

‘I am,’ says Ferrus softly. His voice is unmistakable, the Medusan accent Sanguinius remembers of old. But it is thin, almost fragile. There is no substance in it. It’s not a whisper. There are plenty of those still scratching and rustling in the gloom around them. It is a voice that seems to have carried from far away to reach him, and the distance has robbed it of any weight or volume.

‘Yet I see you,’ says Sanguinius.

‘And you don’t trust that,’ replies Ferrus. Again, there is weary distance in his tone, as though his words are coming from some remote and desolate place and not the figure standing in front of Sanguinius at all. The Great Gorgon’s voice seems to have travelled so far, it is exhausted by the time it

passes his lips.

‘I do not,’ says Sanguinius.

‘Good,’ the Gorgon replies. ‘Good. The first lesson. You are prepared. Trust nothing, not even yourself.’

‘Are you… here to instruct me?’ Sanguinius asks, ready to strike in an instant.

‘No,’ Ferrus answers. He shakes his head slowly and sadly as he says it. ‘I don’t know how I come to be here, brother. But I know that much. Trust nothing. I was far too trusting. Too sure of myself and my strength. Too certain of my anger. When my loyalty was impugned…’

He sighs.

‘Damn Fulgrim. He thought so little of me. That bastard thought I would break my oaths. He thought my loyalty was weak. My loyalty wasn’t my weakness, brother. My anger was. I acted so hastily, provoked by his effrontery.’

Ferrus looks down. His lips have barely moved during his utterance, and when they have, they have not matched the shape of his words. Sanguinius tightens his grip on his sword, but he knows this isn’t an un-synced pict-feed. It’s solid. It’s corporeal. What, then? A phantasm conjured by the fever of his own injuries? Some Neverborn incarnation? Something with his dead brother’s face?

‘I learned that lesson,’ says Ferrus. His mouth moves belatedly, lagging behind his speech. ‘And since then, we’ve all learned it. We’ve learned it the hard way. Now we stand at a place where treachery and deceit are so commonplace, we trust nothing. Not one thing. Not our brothers, not our eyes…’

He looks back at Sanguinius. There is dreadful pain contained in his silver eyes. Pain and longing. It’s a look that speaks of intense anger, and of agony barely held in check.

‘Not our eyes indeed,’ says Sanguinius.

‘I understand,’ says Ferrus Manus. His lips try to smile, but they fail. His plate is as fine and immaculate as the day it was made. He has no weapons. His great bulk is as solid as the stone sarcophagus behind him. Sanguinius can see the quicksilver gleam of the necrodermis sheathing his brother’s famous hands. Now he begins to perceive the same sheen on the Gorgon’s throat, his chin, his face, as though the iron has spread to entirely enclose

his flesh. Sanguinius senses an immense act of will at work, an ironclad feat of containment to hold himself together and not succumb to the engulfing rage that threatens to annihilate him.

Ferrus turns to stare at the numeral IX etched into the casket's surface, as though pondering, or distracted by a memory.

'You see,' he says, 'I think treachery is dead.'

'Dead?'

Ferrus nods. 'Yes. Perhaps not dead exactly. Impossible. It's become impossible. Everything's broken now, brother, everything is wrong. The absolute treachery of our enemy is established beyond any doubt. We expect no truth from them. And the powers that invest them… well, they are untrustworthy as well, by their very nature. We've all learned that too. So we go through our lives into this final battle expecting everything to be a trick, and thus nothing *can* be a trick. Deceit, treachery… they only work when there is trust to abuse.'

He turns his mournful, silver gaze towards Sanguinius. He rubs his throat with the fingertips of one hand, as though the neck guard of his plate is chafing.

'You came knowing this was a trap.'

'I did.'

'But you came anyway?'

'Yes.'

'And it is a trap,' says Ferrus. 'But I'm not part of it.'

'I can't take your word for that,' says Sanguinius.

'Of course you can't,' says Ferrus.

'You look like you, and you sound like you,' says Sanguinius, 'and you smell like you. But you are a long time dead.'

'I *am* dead, brother,' says Ferrus. 'We all are.'

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6:xvi

Truth (and lies)

Fo is deep in work, face to the cogitator screens.

‘Define “better”,’ says Xanthus, stepping forward. He doesn’t want to interrupt and delay things any further, but he needs to know.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘You said you can build a better one. What does “better” mean in that context?’

‘More effective,’ says Fo, ‘more precise. Effective against Astartesian genetics without risk to the general population.’

‘That risk existed?’ asks Xanthus.

‘Of course,’ says Fo. ‘It’s a biological weapon.’

‘And why do you think this?’ asks Andromeda.

‘Because you were right, Selenar,’ says Fo. ‘Now I am actually able to study the Sigillite’s private notes, I can see that I had failed to account for the exoplanar forces to which mortal incarnation is fundamentally bound.’

Fo glances sidelong at her.

‘I make no excuses,’ he says. ‘I am a relic of the past, from an era when the warp was essentially unknown. Genetics was an applied science all of

itself, and I excelled at it, in ways that history has condemned me for. Science was quite separate from… from religion, and art. From the metaphysical. It's curious, I think,' (I don't think, for now I *know*, and it terrifies me) 'that in the age of the Imperium, the most secular era of mankind, the concept of a soul must now be taken seriously.'

He looks at Andromeda.

'You attested that my weapon would fail,' he says, 'because it would operate at a purely genetic, that is to say *physical*, level. You were correct. I had not embraced the idea that we are more than just flesh. In my day, notions of spirit and soul were not the purview of scientists. But the likes of your Emperor, and the Sigillite, have demonstrated that no such division exists. We are all body and soul. Our solid, mortal flesh is anchored to an intangible essence of psycho-material, what us heathens would call a soul, that co-exists with the realm of the immaterial. When the warp was opened to permit interstellar transport… and let's face it, that's the real reason it was done… it revealed this truth, a truth previously only imagined by poets and priests. We are all materia and immateria, intrinsically linked.'

Fo rises to his feet. He seems older and more frail than ever, but more alert in ways that alarm them both.

'So no,' he says, 'the genetic destruction of the Astartesian line will not kill them outright. Merely their cellular corporality. Their souls – and, believe me, the scientist in me still winces to use such a term in rational discussion – will continue to exist, within the warp, undoubtedly as an agitated and potentially disruptive convulsion that would have dire long-term effects on the material galaxy. To achieve peace and prevent the violent perturbations of the warp, we must achieve stability and balance between materia and immateria.'

'You didn't know this?' asks Andromeda.

'My business is flesh,' says Fo. 'In my day, such knowledge was the province of seers and visionaries and gnostics, and thus had no part to play in scientific rigour. In *this* day and age… your beloved Emperor has so vehemently suppressed all spiritual philosophy that these concepts are widely seen as scientific facts, and thus blandly accepted, with no consideration of their context and implications for emotion, thought–'

'Empyric studies are restricted fields because they are fundamentally dangerous,' Xanthus objects.

‘Of course they are!’ retorts Fo. He snatches up a data-slate from the workstation. ‘The Emperor strictly limited all knowledge of the warp. Information was shared with regard to essentials like stellar travel and astrotelepathy… and even there it was meted out in very small portions. He denied knowledge, the deep knowledge He had obtained, for reasons of species safety. That’s why He banned all religions and anything that encouraged freedom of faith or imagination. He did so because *knowledge* of the warp is itself a contaminant. But, look here!’

He waves the slate at them.

‘In his journals,’ says Fo, ‘your beloved Sigillite protests, again and again, going back decades, the Emperor’s epistemology and His restriction of knowledge! He states clearly that he believes it to be a fundamental danger to the Imperium! Look, here! He privately petitions the Emperor to relax the directive. He argues that the warp is an existential danger to us, to any psycho-able species, and that it will remain an existential danger whether we know about it or not. Ignorance is the real harm. Malcador, of whom I am growing fonder with every line I read, reasons that it is better to know and understand a threat than to innocently blunder on regardless. He states that the primarchs and the Astartes, not to mention the general corpus of mankind, ought to understand the potential consequences of their actions and their very thoughts. He maintains they can better protect humanity from the menace of the warp if they are fully aware of its power.’

‘And the Emperor rejected this?’ asks Andromeda.

‘Yes,’ says Fo. ‘For “the good of mankind”. But what we are now facing, this entire disaster of a war, is what happens when you fail to teach your children properly. Might religion, or pure faith, unchecked, risk untoward consequences in the warp? Of course! But ignorance is worse. Your Master of Mankind believed that no one was good enough, or clever enough, or *careful* enough to be left alone with the fire. Your Emperor trusts no one. And this is the misery that rains on us all as a consequence of that.’

Fo tosses the slate on the desk.

‘I am revising the function of the Terminus device in the light of Malcador’s insights,’ he says wearily. ‘I am, not to overstate it, revising my entire scientific rationale. But I believe I will prevail. I can now see the dangers, you see? The consequences. Malcador is a wonderful guide. Thank you, Chosen One, for allowing me this access. I need to prepare a range of

gene-code samples. There are many already here in the Sigillite's genomic archive. I will need some more as a control. I will systematically test the principles of my bio-mechanical phage on those samples in order to finesse and calibrate its efficacy.'

He looks at Andromeda.

'Before you ask, I cannot estimate how long this will take. I will, of course, work as fast as I can.'

He slots a series of tubes into a differential centrifuge and activates agitation.

'I presume you are now able to report adequate progress to our *other agency*?' he adds.

'Yes,' says Andromeda. She glances at Xanthus, and then heads towards the staircase to follow the tower down.

Once she's gone, Fo resumes his seat (Have I convinced them? I scarcely believe or understand this stuff myself, and the implications petrify me) and starts to compose rapid and complex sequences on the central cogitator.

'You understand we still don't trust you, don't you?' says Xanthus.

'And never will,' Fo replies. He glances at the Chosen. 'That's all right. I am not trustworthy. I am trying to be as transparent with you as I can. I don't want to be here, Xanthus. Let me make it clear, quite honestly, that my chief desire is to escape. There's no point lying. I want to escape you, the damn Custodes, and every *other agency*. I want to escape Him and this whole misbegotten Imperium. And I will try to do so, and keep trying, and ultimately, I believe, I will succeed. I will use every opportunity and scrap of cunning I can.'

'I appreciate your candour,' says Xanthus.

'Don't mention it. But I also accept that, for now, I am your prisoner, and we are in this together, and there may indeed be a way in which I can assist in our salvation. So, I am devoting my entire attention to this work.'

He types another line of code, then smiles at Xanthus.

'Now roll up your sleeve.'

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Nothing in the darkness

They run until they can’t run any further. Exhausted, panting, they finally slow to a halt. Zybes lowers himself to the ground against the base of a plinth, gulping for air. Katt leans against a wall between two oblivious statues of water nymphs. She closes her eyes, trying to steady her panic and manage the sour aftertaste of Actae’s psykana. Her hand shoots to her mouth as she gags again. She swallows.

Out of breath himself, Oll glances at Leetu. They’ve left the stampeding, terror-stricken crowd behind. The hallway they’ve reached is nocturnal, the palatial ornamentation and fine mosaics lost in quiet gloom. There is a faint echo, in the distance, that could be laughter and screams.

‘Were we pursued?’ Oll asks.

Leetu stands in the doorway and peers back the way they have come. He can see the stately hall they have just run down and, through the half-open doors at the far end of it, the identical hall before that. Nothing stirs. The aligned rows of statues are as serene as ever. The lights have failed as far back as he can see, except for one electro-flambeau pendant just inside the last doors, which buzzes and flickers at half-power.

Somewhere, a piercing shriek rises and falls, but it could be from a million miles away.

‘No,’ Leetu replies. He gently closes the towering golden doors, and turns to Oll. ‘But that doesn’t mean we’re safe here,’ he says.

‘I don’t understand what just happened,’ wheezes Krank, bent over, his hands on his thighs. ‘Those things were just suddenly…’

‘The Sanctum’s breached,’ is all Oll can tell him.

‘You mean to say the traitors have broken in?’ groans Zybes. ‘They’ve stormed the Palace?’

‘They didn’t break in,’ says Oll. ‘They just… *were in*. They were not, and then they were. You saw your thread tied on that statue, Hebet. The geometry has changed, you see? Inside and out? Walls don’t matter any more.’

‘I don’t understand,’ wails Zybes.

‘Of course you don’t,’ says Actae, straightening up, but still clearly weak and unwell. ‘But you can at least be quiet. Your pitiful whining will draw attention to us.’

‘Back there. You got inside my head!’ Krank hisses at the blind witch.

‘She had to, Dogent,’ snaps Katt.

She pauses, clears her throat and wipes her mouth. Oll doesn’t like how ill she looks. The strain of sharing her mind-space with Actae is taking its toll. Their facial expressions are starting to mirror each other’s.

‘It was the only way to bring us clear of that panic. And now she’s going to use her talents to find us a way out, or a place to shelter.’

‘I need time to recover my strength, girl,’ says Actae. ‘My will is depleted. You can feel that full well.’

‘I can, and I don’t care,’ says Katt. ‘Do it.’

Actae scowls.

‘Listen, *my leash*,’ she says. ‘Even if I was strong enough, there’s nothing to read. Time is out of joint, somehow.’

‘Time?’ asks Oll.

‘The causal flow has stopped. It’s been suspended. Dimensions as we understand them are submitting to the warp.’

Oll nods.

‘Are we going to die, like the witch said?’ Krank asks him.

‘What the hell did she mean about time?’ Zybes asks.

‘What are we going to do, Trooper Persson?’ asks Graft.

‘Just give me a moment,’ Oll tells them. He walks away from the group, and follows the gloomy hallway to its far end, where it widens into a small, circular atrium. Statues loom over him from their pedestals, just suggestions in the half-light, mythological forms whose meanings have been forgotten. Silence, like darkness, hangs heavy. His anxious mind pictures the murder that must be sweeping through the Palace.

Another set of double doors faces him, three times the height of a man. They are shut tight. He wonders what lies beyond them. He doesn’t want to open them and find out.

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Fragments

They finally reach the door. The oblong of light. The postern hatch. Honfler pulls Sartak through.

At the very last moment, the Space Wolf feels the immense blackness behind him gust like a winter wind, as though it is finally coming for him. But Rewa Medusi hauls the hatch shut and quickly reactivates the lock.

On the far side of the engine gates, the Martian Approaches are as they left them. The denial companies wait at readiness in the hazy glare of the wall lamps. The huge passageway is otherwise empty.

‘What did you see?’ Medusi asks.

‘Nothing,’ Sartak replies, truthfully. He can feel that frost has hardened the braided tails of his beard. He can see the sheen of it on Honfler’s plate.

‘Priority message to Hegemon Command,’ the praetor-captain orders. ‘Make report of potential breach on the Martian Approaches–’

There is a thump behind them. They all turn to look at the scabbed metal of the towering barrier. Another thump, something striking the other side of it. They bring their weapons up. Something bangs against the postern hatch, then a tapping begins a few metres to the left of it. Another thump, over to

the left side.

‘Defensive lines!’ Honfler calls. ‘Clavian formation!’

The denial companies move as one, forming clean block formations in front of the engine gates.

‘Hegemon?’ Honfler asks.

‘Still trying,’ one of his officers replies.

‘Nothing’s coming through that,’ Medusi murmurs.

‘Nothing should be on the other side either,’ replies Sartak. ‘Keep your line!’

The hammering and banging intensify. It’s coming from multiple points. Some of it is light tapping and scratching. Other knocks are hard, urgent bangs. A few of them, Sartak realises, are coming from high up, the top section of the engine gates, twenty metres above them.

All of the knocking and tapping ceases suddenly. The stillness lingers.

Then a rime of frost begins to appear on the engine gates. Patches at first, glittering. Then larger scabs and swirls, caking the metal. Sartak can hear it crackle as it forms and creeps.

‘Throne of Terra…’ Medusi murmurs.

‘Get me the Hegemon now!’ Honfler yells. His order is drowned out by the sudden boom of bolter fire.

Brothers in the rear lines of the denial companies are toppling, shot in the back. Some fall with smoke billowing from holes in their plate, others are blown off their feet by the flame-shock of mass-reactive impacts.

The companies, now in disarray, turn. Honfler doesn’t need to command a return of fire. Traitors are flooding down the Martian Approaches towards them, weapons blazing.

They’re coming from behind them. There is absolutely no indication how they can be coming from that direction. Sartak sees Night Lords, Sons of Horus, and charging World Eaters.

The denial companies open up, firing at will, cutting traitors off their feet and out of their wild, headlong lines. A two-way storm of bolt-shot, beams and las-fire lights up between the loyalist companies and the advancing mass.

But there is no cover. The denial companies have the frost-coated gates at their backs. They are pinned. Enemy fire is cutting them apart, dropping Imperial Fists, Salamanders and Iron Hands.

Sartak roars a Fenrisian cry of defiance, firing his bolter at the onrushing foe. There is nowhere to go except the grave.

John Grammaticus follows Oll into the gloomy atrium.

‘I’ll be honest,’ he says quietly, ‘I don’t have a clue what to do now.’

‘Nor do I, John,’ says Oll.

‘I was hoping you’d stepped aside to have a quiet word with your god,’ says John, more joking than not. ‘You know, get that faith of yours to guide you again, or whatever.’

‘Not any more,’ says Oll.

John nods, and chuckles sadly. Then he feels his smile slipping away.

‘Wait, what do you mean, “not any more”? Oll?’

‘Whatever plan Ollanius had,’ interrupts Actae, ‘it is now patently in tatters.’ She has approached, with Katt’s support, stately but frail, like some stiff-limbed, ancient queen of the underworld.

‘Not yet,’ says Oll.

‘How can you say that?’ Actae asks scornfully.

‘Because I never had one,’ says Oll.

John stares at him. Oll shrugs.

‘My plan can’t be ruined, because I never had one,’ he says.

‘She was right?’ John asks, his voice compressed by disbelief. ‘The witch was right? All along? All this time you’ve been winging it, and trusting your damn faith to see us through?’

Oll steps away from him and sits down on the plinth of one of the statues. John isn’t going to let it drop.

‘Oll? Tell me that’s not true. Oll!’

‘When you came to my door, John. When you asked for my help, what did you think I was going to do?’

‘I don’t know!’ John says. ‘But you know Him. I thought you’d know secrets, stuff that no one else knows, about Him, and this Palace, and the way He thinks and works–’

‘Anything I know is long out of date,’ says Oll. ‘I don’t know any more than you do, Grammaticus.’

‘But you *agreed*, Oll. You agreed to help me.’

‘I seem to remember it took a lot of persuasion. Find the Emperor and make Him listen to reason? I was more concerned about saving these

people and getting them to safety. But you were insistent–’

‘*That’s* why you said yes?’

‘You were always very good with words, John. You were inspiring. You were prepared to stand up against unimaginable power. So I said yes, John. I had no idea how we’d accomplish it, but I said yes.’

‘I share Grammaticus’ consternation, Ollanius,’ says Actae.

The others are approaching, hesitant and curious, drawn by the raised voices.

‘Like him,’ Actae continues, ‘I assumed you had some plan. You’ve refused to share it. You play your cards close, and there is merit in such caution. As you said to me, a plan works best when the fewest people share it. But now, it seems there are no cards at all, and there never were.’

‘You’ve been making it up as you go along,’ says John.

‘I believed–’ Oll begins.

‘Believed what?’ John growls. ‘In *this*?’

He reaches out and grabs the little golden Catheric symbol strung around Oll’s throat.

‘This?’ he asks, almost shaking with anger. ‘Just this? You thought some divine providence was going to direct you, when the time came?’

‘Please let go of that, John.’

‘Is it true?’ asks John, aghast.

‘Let it go,’ says Oll quietly.

‘Trooper Persson believes in god,’ says Graft. ‘This I have recorded about him. He is pious. He cherishes a private faith in–’

‘Have you been waiting for some *god* to intervene?’ asks Katt.

The disappointment is visible on their faces, even in the gloom.

‘They just trusted you,’ says Actae. She makes no effort to disguise her contempt. ‘Have you suborned us into some personal act of spiritual–’

‘No,’ says Oll. ‘What I believe is my business. I’m not asking you to believe in anything. I never have. Any of you.’

‘But your faith is guiding you?’ asks Katt. Those dark eyes fix Oll.

John knows that, of all of them, she’s the one Oll won’t lie to. He watches as his old friend nods.

‘Then we never stood a chance,’ says John. He lets go of Oll’s symbol and turns away in despair.

Amit steadies his line. It's close now. They can hear it coming down the Western Mass Passageway. A vast host, moving swiftly.

'Steady!' Vexillary Roch yells. Those of them carrying shields have locked them into basic walls facing the mouth of Western Mass. They can all feel the air stirring across the concourse, driven by the weight of bodies moving up the passageway.

'Steady!' Roch yells again.

That's not going to be enough, Amit thinks. They're all so damn low on munitions. The resupplies they were promised have never arrived. They need to be closing the passageway hatches and shutting the blast doors and iris valves. They need to close access off. The denial companies won't hold a main-force charge at bay for long with the ammunition they're carrying. It'll come down to blades in a minute or two, and blades are no way to hold a space like the Marnix Confluence against superior numbers.

'Steady!' Roch yells.

Why isn't Palace Command closing the hatches? The tactics for interior defence were carefully planned. Don't they know this is happening? Why are there no alert sirens?

The charging mass arrives.

'Contact!' Roch shouts, then almost immediately, 'Hold fire! Hold fire!'

It isn't an enemy force. It's Palace citizens, courtiers, workers, thousands of them, streaming out of the Western Mass Passageway towards them in a blind panic. Amit can hear the screams, smell the terror. They're running from something, running in a frenzy of desperation. People are getting knocked over and trampled underfoot.

Roch starts bawling orders to reposition the denial companies. They need to funnel and contain this enormous, flowing multitude. They need to draw these crowds off the concourse, and channel them away into the side galleries and adjacent halls. But no one's listening. The citizens are just pouring out, unheeding, fleeing without sense or reason.

Amit hears the first of the shots. He turns to pinpoint their origin. The Confluence's vast and booming acoustics are amplifying the screaming and crowd noise. The tumult is swirling and ringing around him, bouncing off the chamber's walls, echoing back–

No, a shot. Two more. Another burst.

He suddenly sees brothers in the right flank of Denial 963 dropping hard,

White Scars with their plate blown open and flame dissipation bursts around them.

‘Turn!’ Amit yells. ‘Turn now!’

The enemy is on them. It’s not coming through Western Mass or Kylon. It’s coming from behind them.

Halfway down the tower’s spiral stairs, on her way to report to Amon, Andromeda hears the air split. The Retreat shakes. A deafening boom rolls across the Inner Sanctum, long and plangent, like the howl of a dying god. As it dies away, others rise to take its place. It is a sound like the dreadful war-horns of the Titan legions, but a hundred times louder and more profound. The noise shakes her diaphragm and makes her feel sick.

She runs down the stairs and out through the tower’s entrance portico to where Amon stands at the head of the Pons Aegeus sky bridge.

‘What is it?’ she asks, raising her voice to be heard over the din. He is gazing at the sky, which, above the spires and turrets of the citadel, is degenerating into patterns of livid mottling and jagged purple bruising.

‘The warning horns,’ he says.

‘What warning horns?’

‘The doom sirens of the final fortress,’ says Amon. A wind picks up and tugs at them from the deep gulf below the bridge. The horns continue to blare, rattling the sky.

‘What does it mean?’ she asks.

‘It means the Sanctum has been penetrated. Properly, fully. Not the brief incursions suffered before the Gate was locked. A full breakthrough. The traitors and the Neverborn are now loose inside the final fortress. The last stand has begun.’

‘I… I’ve never heard them before. I’ve heard klaxons and general raid alarms, but never this,’ she says.

‘That’s because they have never sounded before,’ says Amon. ‘Ever.’

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6:xix

Act of faith

Somewhere, far away, immense horns begin to howl. The last, booming words of a doomed planet. Everything in the gloomy atrium shivers slightly. The golden doors rattle in their frame.

Oll slowly rises to his feet. He can't bear the look on their faces. He knows he should say something to reassure them, but he can't, and he won't pretend to be something he isn't.

He touches the charm around his neck gently.

'My wife gave me this,' he says. 'She was Catheric. I respected her beliefs because I loved her. Over the years, I found the rites comforting. I didn't believe, but I agreed with the underlying values of community, love, peace, kindness–'

'Kindness?' says Actae, with a disdain that could etch metal.

'Yeah, *kindness*. It's a meek little word, isn't it, for a commodity that too many people these days think of as weak and trivial. There ought to be a stronger word for it. I'd say "humanity", but that usage has been debased by our history.'

Oll lifts the charm over his head, and lowers it into his palm, letting the

chain snake and loop. He stares at it.

‘This is all I have left of her. I still don’t believe in her god, not really. Not in any god. But I was born in an epoch when men thought gods were real. Belief was a fundamental part of every person’s life. You need to understand, I’ve lived far more of my life in a world that believes in the divine than I have in one that firmly doesn’t. It’s bred into me. Now we exist in an era when the gods aren’t just dead, they never existed to begin with. I am a man hardwired for pious belief who has survived into an age that’s entirely secular. I happen to cherish the triumph of reason over superstition, but it’s still a cold place for a man like me. Yet look at us now. This rational, enlightened Imperium. Ruled by an all-powerful being, who moves in a mysterious way, and expects our absolute devotion and obedience. Besides terminology, how is that really any different from the world I grew up in? We might as well worship Him.’

He lifts his gaze from the object in his open palm and looks at them. He can see what he’s saying is making them all uncomfortable.

‘I think many do,’ he says. ‘The problem is, I know He’s not god. And He’s the reason there is no religion. He outlawed it because it’s dangerous.’

‘There is abundant evidence that it is…’ says Actae.

‘Indeed,’ says Oll. ‘But all those creeds, down through history, reflected man’s basic urge to answer some existential need. There’s a reason we built temples long before we built cities.’

‘We did?’ asks Krank.

Oll nods. ‘I was there. It’s the same reason priests were always the keepers of a culture’s secrets. The same goes for art, and for the imagination. There is an ineffable meaning within us that cannot be easily articulated. I know why He banned religions. He was trying to insulate mankind against the warp. The warp finds a way in, wherever there is imagination or an inquisitive mind.’

‘The warp is no religion!’ scoffs Actae.

‘Of course it isn’t,’ replies Oll. ‘And it has no gods. Not real gods. It is a fundamental threat to material life, but it’s also a fundamental part of reality. You can’t safeguard against it by pretending it doesn’t exist.’

Oll pauses.

‘The Emperor cut mystery out of the human experience, but left an untreated wound. It was utterly typical of His arrogance and impatience.’

‘You saw this coming…’ says Katt quietly.

‘Maybe not exactly this, but yes,’ says Oll. ‘All those years ago, when He and I worked together to build the human world, I could see where His intentions could lead. That’s why I broke with Him. That’s why I damn well *stabbed* Him. He was dealing in absolutes, and I couldn’t stop Him. So I walked away. I shouldn’t have done that. I should have kept trying. Maybe this is my act of contrition.’

He shrugs.

‘Anyway, now, perhaps too late, I’m trying again,’ he says. ‘I’m a Perpetual. I may not be as powerful as Him, because I wasn’t born with His appalling psychic gifts, but I’m older than Him. I’ve seen civilisations rise and fall. I’ve watched the cycle too many times.’

He puts the chain back around his neck.

‘Erda told me she believed Perpetuals were precursor examples of *Homo superior*,’ says John quietly. ‘An advance guard to steer human evolution.’

Oll nods. ‘That’s what I believed, in the early days. I understood myself for the first time. It felt like a consolation for the cruel repetition of an unending life.

‘Cruel?’ Krank asks.

‘Lives come and go like seasons to me. It’s heartbreaking. Finding meaning for my life was a solace. So, like Erda, and a few others of our kind, I accepted that the Perpetuals are supposed to guide the potential of the human race. We knew a responsibility like that would be too easy to abuse, so we kept our touch light. When He came along, oh… He was so extraordinary, and I was swept up by His commitment and His proactive approach, until I saw it for what it was. He has a plan, John. He’s always had a plan, and He doesn’t care what it costs to accomplish it.’

For a moment, Oll can’t keep the scorn out of his voice.

‘So that’s when and why I refused to have anything to do with it, ever again. I went away, and I lived my lives out, one at a time. Simple lives.’

He gestures towards John, who won’t meet his eyes.

‘Then John Grammaticus came to my door,’ Oll says. ‘Well, Horus’ war arrived first. Calth was burning, and everything was gone, and there was John, with his silver tongue, begging me to help him.’

‘Now wait…’ says John. He stops. He shrugs. ‘No, that’s fair. I begged.’

‘John claimed that it wasn’t too late to stop it. To intervene. He had

external help from creatures older and wiser than humanity and, god knows, a desperate need to atone.'

The others all look at John.

'What for?' asks Krank.

'That's up to John to tell you, if he wants to,' says Oll.

'I made things worse,' says John simply.

'How?'

'The Alpha Legion,' says Actae.

'Yes,' says John, 'may Oll's imaginary god forgive me.'

Katt looks at Oll. 'What did Grammaticus say to convince you?' she asks.

Oll smiles at her sadly. 'In the end, nothing. It was you. It was all of you.'

They glance at each other, puzzled.

'Actae has a theory as to why you've all become part of this,' says Oll. 'Like you're all archetypes. Part of a puzzle, or a ritual, that needs to happen. I don't think it's that. The machinations of the Emperor, and Horus' war, they are far too easy to ignore from a distance. The scale's too big. But you put human faces on it. You reminded me of my responsibility. The covenant between Perpetual and mortal. And you've been reminding me of that every step of the way since Calth.'

He looks at John.

'So that's my faith, John. Mock it all you like. I have to believe I was born with some kind of purpose to fulfil. I don't know what that is. But I know what it isn't.'

'Do you?' asks John.

'It absolutely isn't what He's doing,' says Oll. 'So I have to stop Him. Of course I don't know how I'm going to do that. I never have. I just have to believe I can.'

He grasps the chain around his neck again, so tight it feels like he'll break it.

'Have I got a plan?' he says. 'No, I haven't. I don't have a plan, precisely because He *does*.'

No one says anything. Then Graft tilts its head with a soft whirr.

'You are speaking of "good works", Trooper Persson,' it says. 'Of the endeavour to help others who require help without expectation of reward. This I have recorded about you on a number of occasions. The concept concords with servitor function parameters. Is my instructional coding

faith?’

‘It’s programming, servitor,’ scoffs Actae.

‘Don’t be superior,’ Oll snaps at her. ‘It’s a reasonable question. And I don’t think the two are all that different. It’s about doing what’s right, or what needs to be done. It’s about helping those around you, unconditionally. It’s about thought for others. It’s about kindness, Actae. It’s about using the time you have well, for everyone’s sake, and I have not used my time well, which is shameful, given that I’ve had so much of it. I’ll use the time I have left as well as I can.’

‘Except there is no time,’ says Actae.

‘The Eleniki of antiquity distinguished two concepts of time,’ Oll replies. ‘Did you know that? A woman called Medea taught me the idea. There was *chronos*, which was ongoing, experiential time, external to us, and *kairos*, which was opportunity, or the propitious moment. Chronos means the flow of history, and I’ve stood back from it for too long. And now it’s stopped dead. Kairos means seizing the instant. I think we’ve still got time for that.’

He turns from them, and walks over to the resolutely closed double doors. He grasps the handles.

‘We just push on,’ he says, ‘and see what’s waiting for us.’

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The invaders

Imperial Fists are trained to operate using all available data. Their warfare is thorough warfare, optimising any intel at their disposal. But since the wild butchery on the Gilded Walk, the flow of data has steadily degraded, and now… Now, what little remains makes no sense.

Maximus Thane thinks he's in the Adelphus Cloister, following the golden hallways that lead to the balneary. He's sure of it. But if he is, where is everyone? Where are the nobles, the scurrying servants, the attendants and serfs? Where are the Sentinels, and why haven't they detected his unexpected arrival and challenged him?

Where is everybody, and how are he and his brothers here? The questions can't be reconciled. Thane tries to isolate the concern until he has supplementary data, but the very fact that he, Berendol, Molwae and Demeny are inside the Sanctum makes *them* the intruders. They are inside a place that it should not be possible to *get* inside. If they have somehow circumvented the greatest defence-work in the galaxy, what *else* might have done the same? What does it say about the security of the Palace?

More alarmingly, what does it suggest about them?

On their intervox there is only a crackle like wood spitting in a grate. Wall-mounted vox-systems are dead when they try them. Thane's initial sense of wonder, almost elation, almost *relief*, at suddenly finding himself inside the Sanctum, is ebbing rapidly. He had resigned himself to the idea that his long, respectable career would end outside, as a life-seller, abandoned beyond the sealed gates. It would have been a death with purpose. But then, impossibly, he was *inside* again. The marvel of that fact has quickly vanished. The place is haunted in its silence. Something is badly wrong. *They* are wrong. Everything is wr–

Berendol eyes him in concern. They can both sense the tension in the initiates, Molwae and Demeny.

Thane feels like shouting out. Someone will hear, surely?

But he can't bring himself to.

'Past the balneary,' he says to Berendol, 'the hallway connects to the Phaeton Processional. There'll be people there. We'll find someone.'

Berendol nods.

'Someone,' Thane repeats to himself. Now he's inside the final fortress, he has only one urge: to get to the Delphic. To throw his weight into the fight. His Praetorian will need all the fighting sons he can get for the repulse, because when the enemy reaches the Delphic, every last body will count. Thane knows this. He's been outside. He's seen what's coming.

But he knows he has a greater duty. He must report, as soon as possible, the fact of their unnatural entry, and the terrible things that fact implies.

They pass into a grand atrium where vast oil paintings, a tribute to Terra's unity with Mars, are displayed. The images, finely figured, seem like a mocking joke to him. He's faced and killed too many of the Dark Mechanicum's disciples to ever trust their kind again.

Molwae switches around, blade raised. Electro-tapestral hangings against the end wall are stirring in the breeze.

'Relax, prentice-brother,' Berendol hisses.

'But–'

'There's nothing there,' Berendol tells him.

'But, sir,' says Molwae, 'there was no breeze before.'

The initiate's right. There wasn't. Thane moves past them, hammer raised. He can detect a cold current of air. The glowing tapestries shiver, their woven voltaics catching the light. The tall golden doors are ajar.

Thane pushes one of them open with the head of his hammer.

Beyond the doors, there's a corridor. Its floor is galvanised metal, its walls and ceiling threaded with heavy ducting. It seems wrong. Why would a grand chamber admit into a dingy service tunnel?

Thane takes a few steps. It's several degrees colder in the tunnel. He can hear the rasp of air-scrubbers. His visor display shows him these things clearly: the acoustic shift, the variance in ambient temperature. It shows him something else, a micro-change registered by the sensoria in his boots and greaves.

He slowly crouches down, and presses his palm to the floor.

Not a floor. A deck. The metal flooring is a series of grav-active plates. They are set to Terran Normal, but his sensoria detected the miniscule shift from natural to artificial gravity. Where in the Palace are there spaces paved with deck plates? That's void-ship construction.

Thane rises, and starts to turn. Berendol calls his name.

The thing is just there. It wasn't there, and then it was. It fills the tunnel ahead of him.

Thane's hammer comes up, but it's nothing like fast enough.

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The path we will have made

There’s nothing. Just another dark hallway, another bare floor, another row of statues. The lights have burned out. There’s a faint, cold draught. He stands there for a moment.

John appears in the open doorway behind him. ‘Anti-climactic,’ he says.

Oll turns and looks back at him with a rueful smile.

‘More often than not,’ he replies. Then, very quietly, he says, ‘John?’

‘What?’

Now he has turned, Oll can see the other side of the doors he’s just come through. He beckons to Grammaticus.

‘Look,’ he says.

Another loop of red thread is tied around one of the door handles on his side. The others gather in to look at it.

‘We didn’t do that,’ says Zybes. ‘We’ve never been here before.’

‘We marked a way as we came in,’ says Oll. ‘Conventionally at first, but we marked a way. Now that the walls are down, and distance is meaningless, the thread is still showing us where to go. Where we wanted to go.’

‘What the hell does that mean?’ asks John.

Oll looks at him. ‘Terra is dying,’ he says. ‘It’s being devoured by the warp, and the warp is mixing everything up. Only a marked path remains.’

‘A path we didn’t make?’

‘We haven’t made it *yet*,’ Oll says. ‘Dimensions have unfolded, and that includes time. You can feel it, can’t you? We have a path through this labyrinth. Erda gave us the means. At some point, we have made it. We’ve marked it out. Some time, somehow.’

‘Oll–’ says John.

‘I know it’s not logical, and I don’t understand it myself, but think. All linear progression has gone. It’s just gone. Time, space. But we’ve left a path through it that remains true. We marked it out. Or we *will* mark it out. We just have to follow it.’

‘Where to?’ asks Krank.

‘I don’t know,’ Oll admits, ‘but it’s got to be better than just waiting here to die.’

‘This path…’ says Zybes. ‘It’s one… we’ve yet to make? Our future selves?’

‘Future, past, it’s all the same now,’ says Oll.

‘That does not seem data-supported, Trooper Persson,’ says Graft, settling back into stationary mode with a hiss of hydraulics.

‘Indeed it does not,’ murmurs Actae. ‘But I can feel the state-change of this place. The inevitable reconfiguration of the material universe.’

‘And I can see it,’ says Katt quietly.

Actae tilts her blind face towards her.

‘Look around,’ says Katt. ‘Can’t you see it too?’

The hallway beyond is dark, the lights fused. Stray sparks drip from burned-out fittings. In the blue gloom, they can see the golden statues, and other trappings of the regal Inner Sanctum.

But as their eyes adjust, they can see that the walls are slate-grey metal, riveted and verdigrised. Heavy stanchions and cross-beams of iron thwart the space above them. The floor is grilled deck plates, not marble. The air stinks of damp and foetid rot.

‘This isn’t the Palace, is it?’ Katt asks.

‘Not any more,’ says Oll.

‘I know this place,’ says John, a notch of fear in his voice. ‘I’ve dreamed

of it. Over and over. The same damn dream.' He looks at Oll. 'It's the ship, isn't it?' he says. 'It's his ship?'

Oll nods.

'I think so,' he replies. 'Folded and bound into the fabric of the Palace, so that it's impossible to say where one ends and the other begins.'

'So… he's here?' says John.

'I presume so,' says Oll. 'And if Horus is here, so is He.'

He walks down the line of statues that look so out of place in the drab bulk of a warship's service tunnel. Four statues down, he finds another loop of red thread.

'Let's find our way to them,' he says. 'For better, or for worse.'

They start to follow him. He wants them to pick up the pace, but he doesn't want them any more scared than they already are.

Yet they have to move.

Whatever has been following him since Calth, the thing at his back, the thing that walks behind him, is now closer than ever before, because it no longer needs time to catch them up.

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Gorgon

The darkness behind the Gorgon is moving imperceptibly, shadow on shadow, like rippling satin. Sanguinius can hear the whispers rustling in it. He can make out the stale scent of other body heats, not all of them living, and the smell of mutilating pain. His skin crawls.

‘I’m not,’ says Sanguinius. ‘I’m not dead.’

Ferrus Manus shrugs slightly, but does not reply.

‘Will you let me pass?’ Sanguinius asks. ‘Or do you intend to–’

‘I won’t stop you,’ Ferrus says.

‘Yet,’ says Sanguinius, ‘I suspect you are a distraction designed to delay me, so–’

‘I am,’ says Ferrus. His silver eyes are hard. His mouth moves out of joint with his words. ‘All of this is. A display of power.’

‘As I thought–’

‘No, Sanguinius. No. *Not* as you thought. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Warn you, I suppose. You have no idea of his power.’

‘Lupercal?’

‘Yes, Lupercal. The power of his will alone is letting me be here.’

The shadows shift and rustle again.

‘But I’m not a trick,’ says Ferrus. ‘I’m not an illusion, or some deceit conjured up from the immateria to divert you. You know that, don’t you? I can see you do. I’m dead, Sanguinius, but I’m here. I’m real, and I’m me, and I’m dead, and I’m here. *That’s* how powerful he is. He doesn’t need to make a ghost of me, or magic up some vision that looks like me. The warp is in him to such a degree, he can simply bring me here from the other side of mortality.’

‘To fight me? To stop me?’

‘Oh, brother, no. To impress you. To show off.’

‘Then I’m impressed,’ says Sanguinius, ‘but I’m still going to kill him.’

A pained smile slowly cracks across Ferrus Manus’ face. It’s a wounded version of a smile Sanguinius has long missed, and it tugs at his heart.

‘And I’m going to watch you do it,’ says Ferrus, his eyes bright, though his mouth is no longer moving with his words at all.

He clasps his gleaming hands together. He stares at Sanguinius intently.

‘That’s the thing about the warp,’ he says. ‘And I don’t think our first-found brother has realised it yet. He’s too drunk on its power. He can do anything now. *Anything* his will desires. You can’t imagine. He can melt the world into the sky. He can blow time away like the tufts of a dandelion. He can twist up all of the materia in our universe into one knotted ball, and summon inevitable cities. He can drag the dead from their tombs and their times, and make them live as they once lived. But there is no finesse. It’s the sport of a child.’

‘You’re saying he has no control?’

‘He has plenty. But the warp is immeasurable. He’s split the empyric realm open, and while he plays with one thing, or delights in another, or masters a new technique, it is wildly spilling out around him, following its own impulses. He put me here on a whim to greet you. I don’t know what he was thinking. To surprise you? To remind you that death is always near? Maybe he thought the sight of your first-lost brother would chasten you or drive you mad. Who knows? Maybe he thought I would tempt you.’

‘To what?’

Ferrus hesitates. ‘Join him? He’d love that. He loves you. Killing things is easy, you see? Destroying things… there’s no challenge, and the satisfaction passes too quickly now he’s done it so often. But turning you?

Having you join him? That would be a challenge, and truly rewarding. What a feat, eh? Not just usurping the Imperium of Man, but turning its most loyal defenders? Having them renounce their cause and pledge to him? That's a real accomplishment. That takes real effort.'

'Well, brother, it won't happen.'

Ferrus' lips do not move, but his voice wells up from far away. 'No, though his case is good.'

'Make it.'

The first-lost primarch hesitates. 'I'd rather not,' he says.

'No, indulge me,' says Sanguinius.

Ferrus glowers.

'Very well. He's won. It's over. Nothing can stop him. Not you, or our father, or Rogal or bloody Constantin. It's done. Chaos has won, and the Triumph of Ruin is upon us. So you, and everyone who persists in fighting can die… or you can submit.'

'I think you know me better than that.'

'I do, I do. But there is an advantage to submission. He's left a place for you, you see? From this moment on, Ruin rules the stars. You can't change that. So you either die, and it happens, or you submit and become part of it. Stand at his side. Be there to guide him. He'd listen to you. You could make a difference. It may not be the future you want. It may be the future you fought tooth and nail to prevent. But it's inevitable. Side with him, and help him make the best version of Ruin.'

Sanguinius nods.

'Now you don't sound like yourself, "brother",' he says. 'Now you sound like a trick. A lie. A mouthpiece.'

Ferrus grimaces. He holds up his powerful hands in a gesture of apology.

'Brother, please,' he says, dismayed. 'I'm not *asking* you to. I'm not trying to convince you. Make his case, you said, so I made it. I don't want you to pledge to him. Trust me, it's better to die.'

'I won't side with him,' says Sanguinius. 'I have never been tempted, and I'm not going to change my mind now. Even if we have lost.'

'Good. I'd have been disappointed if you'd said otherwise.'

'I'd rather fight to my last breath,' says Sanguinius, 'and let the galaxy burn. Even if I can't stop it. I'd rather die.'

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How we fight it

‘That’s not an encouraging sound,’ says Fo, as the horns blast again.

‘No, it’s not,’ replies Xanthus, glancing at the laboratorium’s small windows and feeling terror boil up inside him.

‘Does it mean what I think it means?’

‘Yes, Fo.’

Fo takes a deep breath (terror fills me. I fight the overwhelming urge to flee). He reaches out to adjust a console control, increasing the chamber’s acoustic dampers. The roar of the warning horns becomes muffled, though loose objects on the workstation continue to rattle.

‘Now,’ says Fo, ‘as I was saying…’

‘You want a blood sample,’ says Xanthus. ‘From me?’

‘Yes. Blood, and some cellular material.’

‘I don’t trust you at all, Fo,’ says Xanthus. ‘I suspect this is some attempt to escape that I will not benefit from.’

‘Well, it might be,’ says Fo. ‘But seriously… where could I escape to now? Come on. You are baseline human, I take it? No engineered genetics? I need fresh samples as a control basis, and you’re the only human around.

I’d use myself, but you don’t want that. Roll up your sleeve, Xanthus. Think of this as the moment when you, in your own modest fashion, become one of the Throne’s vaunted champions.’

‘What?’

‘Oh, you don’t have to be a giant beast in ceramite plate to save the world. Every one of us who, in his or her own small way, fights the impending forces of destruction, may be lauded as champions in ages to come. Even me. This is our fight, Xanthus, and this is how we fight it.’

Xanthus scowls at him. Fo lifts the sampler needle.

‘There,’ says Fo. ‘Didn’t hurt, did it? You have just taken a step towards immortality, Chosen One. Your master would be proud of you. And when anybody asks, you can say, with complete sincerity, “Yes, I am indeed a champion of the Emperor.”’

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Champion of the Emperor

Sigismund. That name is secondary now. The Emperor has named him His Champion, and that’s all that matters. All the other trappings and details of his life have been cast aside in pursuit of that singular, surgical duty.

On the Via Aquila, the traitors of the Tenth Company, Sons of Horus, baulk at the sight of him, and at the sight of their captain, Dorgaddon, expiring at his feet in a lake of blood. Sigismund will not give them time to gather their wits.

They think they are facing a man. They are not.

The Champion no longer wears the yellow plate of the Praetorians. He no longer declares himself an Imperial Fist, or even affects the stern wargear of the Templar brethren. He no longer considers himself Sigismund. He is clad in master-crafted armour of executioner black, and wields a huge black blade of unearthly temper, all honour-gifts of the Emperor’s purview, bestowed by the Chosen of the Sigillite for his use. The black sword is secured to his wrist by devotion chains, the only concession he makes to his own past.

At his back, he hears the vast and wretched multitude gasp. He hears

Euphrati Keeler cry his name.

She thinks he will stand with her group, and attempt retreat now he has saved her. One man against a company. The odds are madness. He will force a break, surely, for no one man could face–

He hears her gasp as he starts to move. A strange one, that woman. A special one, singular like him, both of them chosen for a purpose against their will. His encounters with her across the years of this heresy have been brief, but they have always left a mark upon him.

He hears her gasp because he is moving *towards* the enemy.

By the time the Sons of Horus start to react, their outrage spilling out of them, he is upon them and their blood starts spilling out of them too. One man against a whole company. Idiot odds. But no stranger than the induction trial of the Master of the Templars, wherein the supplicant must face two hundred men. He passed that test, a champion of oaths. One against a hundred, two hundred, one against a thousand… It is still a matter of one against *one at a time*. Mob attacks don't work, even if they all come at once. He is only one target, and they are many, getting in each other's way. It is just one against one, again and again. His weapons are fury and skill and stamina. His enemies are fatigue and self-doubt. Not the Sons of Horus, no matter how many oppose him.

His blade, unstoppable, carves through two of them as he runs into the fray, a dragging, sidelong blow that ploughs them both off their feet. They are merely in his way. The black sword severs the arms of a sergeant trying to frame a blow, then crosses to gut a brother swinging for his head. Sigismund rotates, impales one traitor, then hacks to the side with such force that another attacker cartwheels out of the impact. A block, sword almost horizontal, becomes a reversing outward sweep that fells two more. As they drop, his sword returns to the Son whose strike it blocked, and scythes off his head. It bounces on the street's scarred rockcrete.

Sigismund is already turning, parrying a blade as he kicks the wielder backwards. He ducks a chainaxe, cuts the hands holding it, and the throat behind those hands. He spins, slicing down another, then laces his blade down through the bulk of a howling Cataphractii. The monster splits into two vertical slabs. He is moving past them as they collapse, driving a straight impale clean through a faceplate, a back-cut through a spine, and then the blade's length through the chest of a Son who has almost found a

gap in his defence.

He wrenches the black sword out, shearing open the traitor it was buried in, evades, parries, and drives the tip of his blade past a fumbled guard and through breastbone. Then he snaps and reverses, to administer a mirror-impale, perpendicular to his body, that pierces a Son behind him.

Inside ten seconds, he has killed fifteen men. None of them are principal quarries, but a man doesn't target officers and champions without expecting to handle the necessary aftermath of such actions. His attack has been a shock-strike, intended to rock them, and to take out as many as possible before they recover their nerve.

Sometimes, that is enough, and even large units will scatter in the face of such ferocity.

Not the Sons of Horus. But his shock-strike has also been the overture. It has allowed his cohorts to line up.

Sigismund wars alone. His clashes with rival champions are single combat, man-to-man. But on the scarred plains of Terra, amid the code-less mania of Chaos War, the courtesies of single combat are not respected. A lone champion would quickly perish if he expected tournament rules to be observed.

Sigismund is a champion, not a fool.

He has, during the course of his bloody mission across the Palace Dominions, acquired his cohorts. His Seconds. They stand in support, holding back and allowing him the vital singularity of that first, man-to-man clash. Then they close in to harry the remainder when the singular turns to the general.

That moment is now. Sigismund does not need to give a command.

Tank rounds punch into the Tenth Company mob, lifting huge exclamation points of smoke and dirt from the Via Aquila. Traitors are knocked off their feet and into the air. The source of the shell-fire clatters into view: two Sicaran battle tanks, an Arquitor and a Spartan Assaulter from the left side of the road, three Carnodons and a Deimos Predator from the right. They are all scrub-painted in the black and white of the Temple. They lurch out of the roadside ruins, pushing down broken walls and cascading bricks, puffing a halo of dust around their churning treads and juddering hulls. Their main guns are built for range, so they switch to secondary weapons as they emerge. Sponsons and pintle-mounted support guns rage and rattle,

spitting spears of las and heavy tracer into the destabilised traitor group.

The Sons of Horus, nevertheless, are sons of Lupercal. Already mauled ingloriously by Sigismund's one-man onslaught, they have no support, no armour, no cover. But they do not flee. They back away slowly, steadfast, blazing from the hip as they go, ignoring the brothers dropping and minced around them.

Their shots, each one enough to destroy a man, burst and flame off the advancing armoured hulls, bleeding fire and ropes of smoke. It is nothing to the dazzling lances and bolts of light coming at them. Sons of Horus die fast, chopped out of line, cut down like dead weights, annihilated into splinters by direct impacts. Defiant, aghast, unable to grasp they are being comprehensively exterminated, the monsters of Tenth Company grudgingly fall back, leaving a carpet of bodies behind them for the tanks to crunch over.

Sigismund lowers his blade as the tanks roll past him on either side. For a moment, he feels respect for the enemy's resolve. They have not broken or run. Their ranks unstitched by raging fire, they have remained resolute. They are Astartes still, some shred at least.

Then he corrects his thinking. It's not Astartes courage. It's stupidity. It's the obstinate arrogance of a battle group that has become too used to being superior to anything and everything it meets on the field. With Dorgaddon slain, Tenth Company is headless, unable to think, unable to decide, unable to recognise its own approaching doom and reconcile a viable response. It is braindead, a body responding to the neural commands of a head long detached.

Finally, Tenth breaks. Three-quarters mown down and dead, it comes apart. Sigismund can almost see individual warriors waking up, realising that death has finally come for them, understanding that their campaign of triumphal slaughter, which they believed would never be checked, has suddenly ended.

They start to scatter. They bolt for the roadsides, for the cover and shield of ruins. But death is waiting there too.

The ground-troop sections of his Seconds. The Templar brethren, their plate stark white and black. Astartes of other Legions who, separated from their own forces by the churn of war, have pledged to Sigismund's banner. Excertus and soldiers of the Hort Palatine, the Gravis Ninth and a dozen

other armies that have flocked to his formation. They are waiting in the ruins. They are following the tanks onto the roadway in tight columns, using the tank-bodies as shields. They emerge and spread and charge, brandishing weapons, and lofting the stark Champion banners, and they meet the overmatched Tenth as it tries to flee.

Kill-boxed on a road they thought they owned, Tenth Company collapses. The tanks suspend firing as the Templars crash into the milling Sons of Horus and hack them down with sword and hammer. Marksmen from Excertus Stratac 20th and Geno Five-Two Chiliad pick off those who make it as far as the roadside ruins with high-powered headshots. Empyric wraiths scream skywards as they are evicted from bodies too broken to contain them.

There is a fine haze of blood on the wind.

Sigismund walks back to where Keeler is standing. She is staring at the ongoing slaughter behind him, wide-eyed.

‘Mistress Keeler,’ he says, and salutes her with his sword.

‘My lord,’ she replies. She gathers herself. ‘Fate draws us together yet again.’

He makes no comment. She has always held him in high regard. The last time she saw him, she marvelled at his grace, believing that he embodied, more than ever, the Emperor’s will. But now she sees how utterly cold that will can be in its expression. His black plate seems sinister. The austere ebon heraldry feels like a guise of mourning. Or a threat.

‘You *are*… Sigismund?’ she asks. He must seem so changed. If his guise is one of mourning, she no doubt wonders, then who does he mourn? The Sigismund of old, now dead, replaced by this quiet executioner?

‘I am the Emperor’s Champion, mistress,’ he replies, ‘but the man you knew is the man I was.’

‘You… command the field, sir?’ she asks. ‘Is that what “Champion” means?’

‘No, mistress,’ he says. Dorn granted him command of the field of war, but Sigismund, though as great a tactical planner as any, solemnly passed that mantle to Great Archamus, who has proven his leadership genius beyond doubt. Great Archamus’ war-making is broad in scope and wide in frame; Sigismund’s is now as tight and narrow as a blade.

‘My commission,’ he says, ‘is to decapitate the traitor host. To track, and

opportunistically kill, its officers, its captains, its commanders and its paragons, the master-warriors from whom others flee on the field, and the overlords from whom all commands and strategies issue.'

'How… many of them must you kill?' she asks.

'As many as possible, one by one, until death stops me,' he replies.

She seems not to know what to say to that. Behind him, the last rattles and booms of Tenth Company's annihilation echo along the Via Aquila. Black smoke gusts past them, making her shield her eyes.

'I am grateful for your intervention,' she says.

Again, he makes no comment. Instead, he says, 'I heard a voice.'

'I did too, sir.'

'I hear it still.'

'As do I.'

'I am charged by the Emperor to kill the enemy,' says Sigismund. 'But I feel I am meant to suspend that effort long enough to provide you with protection.'

'Protection for what end, sir?'

'Protection, so you may reach your destination,' he replies. He pauses. 'Do you know where you are going?' he asks.

She wants to say *north*. Instead, she says, 'Yes.'

He nods. He unclasps his helm and removes it. His face is grave and deadpan.

'You know this voice, then,' she asks, 'to give it such credence?'

'I do. You know it too?'

'I know that it knows me.'

He frowns. 'Well, it has brought me to you, by means of words and sigils that I chose not to deny. You are now under the protection of my banner.'

'All of us, sir?'

Sigismund's frown deepens. 'How many are you?' he asks.

'Everyone,' she says. 'Everyone that is still alive.'

'So be it,' says the Emperor's Champion.

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6:xxv

Lessons two and three

‘You would rather die, brother?’ asks Ferrus. ‘Well, you will. You will die.’ He pauses. ‘Sorry. But you knew that already, didn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ says Sanguinius.

Not a word Ferrus Manus has spoken has been accompanied by any movement of his mouth. Indeed, his mouth seems clamped, and his jaw clenched, as though he is trying to withstand intolerable pain.

‘You know how?’ he asks, the depth of distance hollowing his words.

‘Yes.’

‘But you came anyway?’

‘Again, yes,’ Sanguinius replies. ‘Because the *how* doesn’t matter, does it? What matters is the *why*.’

Ferrus seems to smile, though the expression is there and gone again in a flicker.

‘I knew we could count on you, Sanguinius,’ his voice says from somewhere. ‘You understand.’

‘I do,’ says Sanguinius. ‘Does he? Does… Horus?’

‘Not even slightly,’ Ferrus hisses.

From somewhere in the darkness beyond him, there is a distant, mangled groan.

Sanguinius' sword comes up sharply, into a proffer, ready to fight.

'Who is there?' Sanguinius asks. 'Who is in pain?'

'Everyone,' says Ferrus. His lips say the word a second after his voice has. 'You are. I am. Pain is the state of life, and death is no release. You need to know that. Lesson two. After what we think of as death, the pain is worse. It devours. They devour you forever. They tear your soul–'

'What are you?' Sanguinius says. 'I do not think you are my lost brother at all.'

Ferrus pauses, and a long and dreadful sigh fills the darkness. Out of that drawn-out sigh, his voice emerges again.

'I am,' he says. His lips form other words, contradictory, and then curl into a grimace. 'Horus, in his madness, brought me here for sport. But now I am here, by force of will, I will endure this torment and stay here. I wouldn't *not* be here for you. My intent is to guide you.'

'Guide me?' Sanguinius asks. 'Or lure me?'

Screams, distant and shrill, echo through the darkness from far away. Sanguinius cannot imagine what torment could have produced them. He ignores the feeling that the screams are familiar.

'Guide you,' Ferrus insists. 'I am dead. Lost. Damned. I was headstrong and foolish, but I can teach you, so you can learn from my mistake. When all's said and done, we're brothers. You and I, brother, we are the start and finish of this. I was the death at the beginning, you are the life at the end.'

He gestures for Sanguinius to follow him, and starts to walk the length of the vault into the draping gloom. Sanguinius hesitates.

'A family comes together for a death or a birth,' Ferrus murmurs. 'This could be both.'

'Wait,' says Sanguinius. He trails his hulking brother a few steps, passing between the rows of silent stone caskets. 'This is the way I came.'

Ferrus pauses, and glances back.

'This is the way I came,' Sanguinius repeats, flexing his grip on his sword. 'You're leading me back–'

'No,' says Ferrus.

'Where, then?' asks Sanguinius. 'You said you'd guide me, but this is not the way. I *came* this way. You're leading me ba–'

‘No,’ says the Gorgon. There’s a hint of impatience, as though the anger imprisoned within the nercrodermal shell of his willpower cannot be quelled much longer. His gaze speaks of frustration at his brother’s struggle to comprehend what he has been told.

‘Horus has knotted materia into a tangled ball. I told you this. Direction is meaningless. This ship, brother, the Throneworld, the Palace, the realms of warp and Chaos… they are all fused and entwined. Don’t look for sense or logic. There is none. Lesson three. Nothing makes sense here. If you want to reach him, you will. It doesn’t matter which way you go.’

Ferrus turns away and faces the impenetrable shadows.

‘You meeting him is inevitable,’ he says.

The Gorgon reaches out, and his gleaming iron hands seem to take hold of the very darkness. Strength shudders through his shoulders and broad back as he begins to split the darkness open. It is as though he is tearing night in half.

Sanguinius takes a wary step forwards. Shreds and tatters of torn shadow drift past him like burned paper. Ferrus Manus is carving a channel into the blackness, his quicksilver hands working and folding the stuff of night like hot metal in a smithy. Ahead of them is a glimmer of twilight, pale as quenched steel. Sanguinius can make out bent girders, sundered bulkheads, damaged hatches. The lightless interior of a murdered ship.

‘Is he here?’ he asks.

‘If you want him to be,’ says Ferrus as he peels the darkness back. ‘It’s up to you. But if he is here, you need to be ready.’

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6:xxvi

Veteran steel

A limb like a tree trunk lashes out, and swipes him aside. Thane flies through the air, hits one of the open doors, cracks it off its hinges, and crashes to the floor.

The thing comes for them. It's had to hunch its bulk to even fit in the tunnel. Antlers, like those of a giant stag, scrape and squeal against the ceiling. Its eyes are bars of vivid amber light, like sickly neon. It stretches its huge, tree-trunk limbs out ahead of it, hauling and clawing itself forward like a potholer. Its hands, each eight-fingered, are as big as grown men. Its vast goat-snout brays, spraying spittle and clouds of steam. Where the fat, purple lips and dirty chisel-teeth part, they expose other rows of teeth, then more rows behind those: serrated fish-teeth, crocodilian spikes, the translucent fangs of benthic predators. The tongue is a glistening blue slab of meat as thick as a boarding ramp.

Thane rolls clear of the doorway half a second before the Neverborn comes through it. Both doors, one already damaged by Thane's impact, shear out of their frames, crumpling like gold foil. Part of the architrave collapses, caught on the spearing antlers. The great head and shoulders

bulge through the doorway. The arms lunge forward, strike the ground, then rake backwards for grip. The dirty, cracked talons of the immense hands puncture the polished ouslite and then score deep, parallel trenches in the gleaming stone. Molwae and Demeny stumble backwards.

Berendol does not. He goes into it, face to face, swinging his greatsword in what seem like slow, lazy loops. He leaves long, savage slices in the Neverborn's extended forearms, slices that instantly well and gush blood, which spatters the floor and matts the thing's mangy fur and spider-leg hairs.

The Neverborn brays again. It gropes and snatches for him. Berendol sidesteps a gigantic, fumbling hand, puts a gash through the ball of a thumb, another, deeper, through a bicep, then comes in at the thing's roaring face, and hacks its cheek and its brow. They have to kill it before it hauls itself into the atrium. Its huge form is pinned and squeezed by the narrow service tunnel. If it pulls itself clear, the lofty atrium will give it space to rise, to stand, to–

Berendol's greatsword cuts more deep lacerations in its snout and brow.

Blinded by its own drizzling blood, the Neverborn snaps its huge head forward and seizes Berendol in its mouth.

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6:xxvii

A book

‘I have worked here for many years,’ says the archivist. ‘I never thought any of these works were more than allegory.’

‘None of us did,’ says Sindermann.

‘None of us, sir?’ asks the archivist meekly.

‘Oh, one or two, perhaps,’ Sindermann says. ‘A few who glimpsed.’

‘You’re thinking of Keeler,’ says Mauer.

Sindermann nods. ‘And who listened to her, eh? We locked her up as a mad prophet, peddling dangerous ideas.’

‘Aren’t dangerous ideas why you came here?’ asks the archivist.

‘Yes!’ exclaims Sindermann, and gets to his feet. ‘Come, my friends. We can sit here and slowly freeze to death, or we could do something.’

‘Get out of here?’ suggests Mauer. ‘Warn someone? Get help?’

‘Warn who? Get help from where?’ Sindermann asks. ‘You heard those horns that blew after Garviel left us.’

They’d all heard them. Even deep in the bowels of the Hall of Leng, the warning horns had been deafening. The booming roar of the Palace announcing it was no longer a palace, no longer safe, no longer unviolated

and secure.

‘At least it’s quiet here,’ Sindermann says. ‘So let’s get to work while we await Garviel’s return.’

The three of them rise and wander back along the stacks. The mounting cold seems to be sucking the light out of the fittings, and even dimming the sound of their voices. It’s harder to read the titles on the spines of books, and the display lights have failed entirely above some artworks.

‘It’s too cold,’ says Mauer, the vapour of her breath accompanying her words.

‘I could try to adjust the climate system,’ says the archivist.

‘Or we could light a fire?’ Mauer suggests. The archivist looks at her in furious horror.

Mauer shrugs sarcastically, and gestures at the shelves around them. ‘Well, there’s plenty of dry kindling,’ she says.

‘I don’t want to be part of a society that burns books,’ says Sindermann.

‘But one that bans them and keeps them hidden is fine with you?’ sneers Mauer.

‘These works have survived an astonishingly long time,’ says the archivist quietly. ‘In most cases, they are the only examples of particular works left extant. Attempt to burn these, mam, and I will kill you.’

Mauer looks at the archivist in surprise. It’s quite the boldest thing the young woman has said since they arrived. Mauer is a head taller, and armed with a gun. The archivist is quite defiant.

‘I was joking,’ says Mauer.

‘But that’s the spirit,’ says Sindermann. ‘Human defiance in the face of wanton desecration. There’s hope for us yet while human beings like this young woman have some fight left in them.’ He turns to the nearest shelves, peering at the titles. ‘And she’s right, of course. These things are historically precious, yes, but they might also be our salvation. If they save but one life, they have proved their worth.’

He pulls some volumes out. Diachronic studies, a *Consolidation of Mathmeta*, isosephic primers and almanacs of gemetria, a study of Crytophasia…

He stops suddenly. He stares at one small, leather-bound book, no larger than a psalter. Other books slide from his hands and thump to the floor like stunned birds.

‘What is it?’ asks Mauer.

‘It…’ he begins. He can’t say the words. Embossed on the cover is the title plate.

The Book of Samus.

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6:xxviii

The One Who Walks Behind You

Loken doesn’t hesitate. He doesn’t try to fight. He doesn’t wait for the hideous giant to fully emerge from the river of blood.

He turns. Runs.

He moves as fast as he can, wading through the thick, viscous liquid, splashing droplets of blood and specks of gore over himself.

The voice cackles behind him, amused, echoing along the service tunnel after him.

‘Samus is my name. You know it. It knows you. You have always known it.’

It’s the old voice. The same wet-as-marrow, dry-as-bone cackle he heard in the Whisperheads. It’s the rasp of the daemon. But it’s other voices too, many others, all twisted together, like plies bound to make rope. Jubal, the Sigillite, Mersadie, a hundred voices, a thousand. He can hear Mersadie’s tone quite distinctly. At the grim pitch of the Solar War, the daemon moved through her, used her voice and form, and then destroyed her. She’s haunted Loken ever since, a ghost no longer able to tell his private story. Her voice haunts him now.

He wants to turn and fight it. Kill it. Kill it for what it did to Mersadie Oliton and the whole Solar Realm.

Loken keeps moving instead. He doesn't look back. He's too aware of the fact that the gloomy, blood-flooded service tunnel is no place to stand his ground and fight a beast like this, head-on. He needs to turn the ship to his advantage.

Somehow. *Somehow*. He can remember the ship's layout perfectly, if the layout hasn't shifted and twisted too far.

And he knows that one glance over his shoulder will end him. One glimpse of that thing, and he will be done.

'I am the one who walks behind you,' laughs the voice.

Then stay behind me.

He runs as fast as his body will propel him, fighting the drag and encumbrance of the frothy, curdled tide. He doesn't glance back, not even when he hears the surging splash of a great shape starting to move and blunder after him, not when he hears the clang of a towering head and shoulders striking and scraping against the overhead pipework as it starts to give chase, not even when a racing wave catches him and surges past, displaced by the mass moving at his heels.

The bow wave nearly knocks him down. He steadies himself and keeps running, the red liquid sloshing and churning.

'Samus. That is the only name you'll hear,' the voiceful of voices echoes. Was the glimpse he saw of the Sigillite before the daemon appeared real, or just another of its lies?

Thirty metres. If Loken's eidetic memory has not been tricked, it's just another thirty metres to the outflow. Twenty. He starts to feel the current against his legs, the tidal flow of the liquid. Ten. The rolling waves driven by the monster's advance slap at the tunnel walls and break around his thighs.

'Look out! Samus is here!'

There. To the left. The grille of the outflow drain, half-submerged, choked by the sheer quantity of fluid flooding the tunnel, clogged and silted by clots of blood and tissue.

He doesn't look back. He scythes at it with his chainsword. The whirring teeth shear through metal, and spray blood in a huge gout. The sword coughs and smokes as he is forced to submerge it to cut more deeply. He

smells blood cooking and burning, a vile brown fume…

The grille collapses. Immediately, Loken feels the abrupt increase in flow, the heave of current against him. He lets go of it, and plunges down into the blood.

The blood carries him. The blood of his lost and damned brothers, probably. It slams him into the drain, sucking, gurgling, drumming, rushing. His limbs and armour grind and squeal against the walls of the outflow as he is dragged into it. Something huge – a clawed hand the size of an adult human – slams into the mouth of the outflow a second too late, buckling metal and denting the tunnel wall.

Everything goes red, then black. Drowned in blood, rattled like a lodge medal in a can, deafened by the muffled rush of the torrent, he is borne away, carried like a dead twig down a drain-chute.

The outflow spits him out into a flooded sump. He thrashes, surfacing, and half-kicks, half-clambers to the edge, then hauls himself onto the walkway. Blood drools off him. He has somehow held onto his chainsword. Behind him, the blood evacuating from the service tunnel is sheeting from the mouth of the outflow, raising a pink mist.

He starts to move, slippery, gore-wet from head to toe. The sump is a huge space, the bottom of a deep, through-deck engineering shaft. It soars above him, strutted and bridged at intervals by frames of pipework and ducting. He can see stale light far above.

He clamps his chainsword, and starts to climb, scaling a service ladder bracketed to the wall. Below him, the cistern of blood, its level rising rapidly, starts to churn and froth. It becomes frenzied. Something erupts from the whirlpool into the air, like a great sea creature surfacing.

‘The only name you’ll hear!’ a voice booms up at him.

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Samus pursues Loken through the bowels of the Vengeful Spirit.

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6:xxix

Words from the Whisperheads

Sindermann opens the book, his fingers shaking.

‘I can’t,’ he says. ‘I can’t read it.’

‘Give it to me,’ says Mauer. She snatches it from him, opens it, and starts to flick through the pages. ‘Why did this one catch your eye?’ she asks.

Sindermann, his mind plunged into an ice-bath of memories of the Whisperheads, can’t find any words to answer her.

Mauer starts to read.

‘“Look at their pathetic legions, their ruptured hosts, their walking corpses, living to kill and killing to kill. There is no longer any point to their psychopathic exertions or their hysterical sacrifices. Nothing remains to be won or lost…”’

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6:xxx

Behind, beside

Loken doesn’t look down. He climbs the ladder, hand-over-hand, his wet grip squeaking on the metal rungs. He hears metal shriek and tear. It’s climbing after him, hauling its huge bulk out of the liquid and up the wall, using its claws to anchor it. The whole wall of the shaft shivers under its moving bulk.

‘My name is Samus.’

The voice-of-voices echoes around him. Loken doesn’t look down. He doesn’t stop climbing.

He feels the ladder jar and start to move.

It’s seized the ladder further down. It’s tearing it off the wall, peeling it away from its brackets from the bottom up. Retaining bolts shear and snap like gunshots. Stanchions scrape and grind. The ladder starts to twist and buckle.

As it collapses and falls away, Loken leaps. He’s thirty metres up at least. He launches himself sideways off the failing, falling ladderwork, arms outstretched.

He almost misses. He hits the nearest bridge of ducts and pipework with

his chest and face, an impact so hard it feels like a bolt-round, and somehow clings on. He claws for grip, legs swinging. Beside him, a long and contorting section of ladder falls away, shorn from the wall, toppling into the cistern with a prolonged screech of bending metal.

His legs mill. His blood-slick hands fight for a firm grasp. Slowly, too slowly, he drags himself onto the top of the bundled metal pipes and hydraulic tubes that form the bridge.

The thing is coming up the wall below him, ascending sheer metal.

Loken gets up. Balanced, arms outstretched, he starts to cross the bridge to the far side of the huge shaft. The pipework judders as the beast gets its hand on it. Loken adjusts his balance, and reaches the other side. A small platform, no more than a ledge. There's a blast hatch over the pipe run that he doesn't have time to open.

He finally turns.

There it is. It is hauling its immense, sinewy mass onto the other end of the pipe bridge, which groans beneath it. It is a matted, dripping bulk, plastered with blood. He can see only its eyes.

'I am the one who walks behind you,' it bubbles gleefully.

Loken doesn't answer. He raises his left hand, and simply beckons, a taunting challenge.

Delighted, it clambers across the swaying bridge towards him, the grip of its talons puncturing the pipes, releasing squirts of oil and hydraulic fluid, and billowing jets of pressurised steam. The whole bridge bows and creaks.

Loken's chainsword sweeps off his back in his right hand. He double-grips it, blade down, and begins to saw its shrieking blade through the pipes, struts and tubes of the bridge. Sparks fly, fluid hoses out with arterial force, metal howls. The air around him clouds with smoke and steel shavings.

The Neverborn snarls in anger and increases its speed, clawing towards him like an ape along a flexing branch.

Loken digs further, his entire strength behind the cut. The chainsword begins to sputter and overheat, losing teeth as the blade burns out and jams. He digs harder.

Entertained, the Neverborn scrabbles closer and reaches out. The chainblade wedges fast, seized up and ruined, with half of the bridge left to sever.

But the damage is enough. The partial cut combines with the weight of the

daemon as it crawls onto Loken’s half of the span. The pipework shears. Cables snap. Struts tear. The bridge folds, shredding away at Loken’s part-cut end. There is an immense squall of ruined, ripping metal. Something else screams too.

The daemon.

The pipework bridge drops into the gulf below, its shattered, rotating structure sparking and smashing against the walls of the shaft. The ruined chainsword falls with it.

And so does Samus.

Loken watches the shapes plunge away for a second. He doesn’t wait to see the deluge of upthrown blood that marks their impact. He turns to the blast hatch, clears the manual bolts, forces open the secured cover on the lock mechanism, and enters his clearance code.

The hatch unlocks. He heaves it open and climbs through.

Beyond, an access hallway, hull-adjacent, port-side. *Through-Access (Port) 511723*, his precise memory tells him. It’s quiet and empty, the glow-globes on half power, burning with a weak, golden light.

He starts walking, moving forward. His armour is scabbed with dried blood. He feels naked without his chainsword, so he draws his bolt pistol. The hallway is so quiet. There is a thin coat of dust on everything, as though no one has been here in a thousand years. His visor hunts for contact, heat sources, motion.

An impact of huge force slams him into the wall from the side.

Dazed, he tries to turn. He’s lost his bolter. There’s nothing on his visor.

‘I am the one who walks beside you,’ says Samus in his ear.

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6:xxxi

Not entirely a city

Zybes finds another, and gestures them over. Another loop of red thread, this one tied around a battered lead drainpipe.

‘It’s one of mine,’ he whispers as he examines it. ‘Definitely one of my knots.’ When he looks up at Oll, Oll can see the bewildered terror in the man’s eyes. His knots, but knots he has never yet tied, made in lengths of twine that he never cut, looped around posts and pipes and statues in a city he has never been to before.

They are retracing steps they have never walked. Their curious odyssey has looped back on itself, like a length of thread.

Is it a city? Oll keeps finding himself thinking of it as a city, but it’s not really a city. Or not *entirely* a city. It’s many things, all threaded together in an order and sequence that make no sense.

It’s an eerie place, dim and grey. There is a constant heaviness, as though a storm is on its way. The sky is overcast and white, a haze through which, now and then, Oll can make out distant dark forms that seem too big to be buildings, yet too still to be anything else. A faint odour fills the air, a smell of damp stone, and in it, something sweeter and more organic, the

unmistakable scent of decomposition just beginning. It's not strong, but it is everywhere, because the air is heavy and perfectly still. There is not a breath of wind.

And yet, there is the sound of wind. A moaning, a low and fluctuating drone that is barely audible, as though an autumn gale is sighing around the gables, chimney stacks and dropping roofs. From time to time, they hear the rustle of dead leaves, wind-blown, or the groan of a door swinging on its rotten hinges, or the rattle of an old window trembling in its frame.

But there is no wind to stir these things, nor any sign of other cause.

Oll feels the tension in his throat, and the tic in his eyelid. There's nothing and no one here, yet at every step, he feels as though they are being watched. He sees his reflection in the dirty glass of old windows, and sometimes those reflections seem to look back with an intent of their own. His peripheral vision crawls with scuttling movement, but whenever he turns to look, there's nothing to see. Something is close by, breathing and observing. He wonders if it could be the city itself, the city… or whatever this place is supposed to be.

Parts of it are a city, certainly. But other parts are the *other* city, the great, arrogant Palace where their journey both ended and began. Oll can see traces of it everywhere: sections of ground where the dirty broken cobbles suddenly become stretches of polished sectile flooring or tracts of gleaming ouslite; patches of wall that gleam with auramite and figures of intertwined Imperialis crests; high arches, some still suspending electro-flambeaux that glimmer with dying power; columns, marble pillars, wall-hangings and tapestries of rich design showing scenes from legend, swaying in the sleepy breeze; gold and alabaster statues that loom in unexpected corners, some set askew on broken ground, some crusted with lichen that would have taken years to grow. The statues seem to watch them too.

The Emperor's Palace is here, in part. It is present, yet not present. It is like being backstage in a great theatre, where the scenery and flats of one tableau are jostled in among those of another while the stage is re-dressed.

The other scene, similarly represented in haphazard form, is the flagship of the traitor. The *Vengeful Spirit*. Its drab architecture and martial ornament, both designed to project power, are interleaved with the imposing golden structures of the Palace, like two strands of DNA woven together to produce some strange chimera. The long companions wander past air-gates

and blast hatches, and stretches of bulkhead wall that still bear the stencilled serial code of their deck position. They creep across panels of deck-plate grating, and can sometimes hear the distant mutter of air-scrubbers and climate systems.

It is ship. It is Palace. It is both and neither. Vestigial structures of the flagship seem to dominate, but there is more besides. The nameless city, into which the relics of ship and Palace are set, which seems to have grown around and between them. It is old and mouldering, raised by long-dead hands in brick and stone, in peg-tile and wood, a sloping, jumbled, crumbling place of decay and antiquity. Cobbled, potholed streets wind between ugly, unplanned buildings. Tiled roofs slope, abut and overlap, sometimes baring their rafters like fangs. Windows, made of thick, bottle-bottom glass, are fogged with condensation, or spiderwebbed with cracks. Gutters droop. Grass and weeds grow between loose bricks. The sky is pale. Everything is grey. There is a hint of rain on its way, but Oll's sure it's rain that forever threatens but never actually falls.

It reminds him of somewhere. He remembers the cities of his long lifetime, and finds echoes. It resembles the warren of unkempt slums that packed the dirty hearts of long-vanished capitals. It reminds him of the gloomy rookeries of timber-beamed merchant burghs. It reminds him of Praag and–

He realises it reminds him of everywhere. It is everywhere he's been, and everywhere he hasn't. It is a place that has slipped free of its geography, wandered from its foundations, and finally pooled here, carrying with it parts of Palace and ship like wayward flotsam.

Or it's a jumble of places that is still deciding what it's going to become.

It scares him deeply. Its quiet emptiness, its dormancy, feels malevolent. It feels as though it is lying in wait for him, marking its time, preparing to pounce. If it's been waiting for him, then it's waited a long time. He wonders if it's been waiting for him, specifically, as though every path and route, taken or not taken, was always going to lead to it. There is no turning from it.

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6:xxxii

‘Look!’

Loken tries to turn, to reach for a blade. The daemon’s paw catches him again, and sends him flying down the hallway. Loken bounces off a bulkhead, and slides to a halt. He can taste blood in his mouth. He tries to rise, to turn, to face the thing advancing on him.

‘I am all around you!’ Samus announces, as it strikes him again from behind instead. The concussion cannons Loken face forward into the wall. He blacks out for a second, then realises he is being dragged along the deck on his back by the ankle. He tries to kick free. He fails.

Samus picks him up, almost crushing his torso. Loken is assailed by the stink of rot, the odours of disease, the smells of cancers and dementias and bacterial phages that only animals can detect. The daemon mashes him against the hull wall, face first, and pins him there. He can hear it breathing, like the bellows of a vast furnace.

A huge paw extends into his peripheral vision, filthy talons extended. The claws rip into the wall beside him, shredding it like damp paper so that it comes apart as pulpy sludge. It tears a hole in the ship’s hull, through the ship’s thick, armoured skin, the kind of rupture that only a penetrator

missile should be able to make.

There is no decompression. No violent slam of air. Just the gaping, ragged hole, billowing fibrous strands and tatters like ashes in the wind. Light glares in.

The daemon moves Loken like a doll, dragging him in front of the hull breach, forcing him to look out. Forcing him to see–

'Look!' the Neverborn hisses in his ear.

Loken sees the world far below. Terra, consumed by fire, throbbing with a terrible radiance. The searing, radioactive glare nearly blinds him. He sees the planet, suffused in a cloak of embers, the burning scald of destruction, the halo of empyric light surrounding the expiring Throneworld like a poisonous crown. He sees fleets ablaze, and columns of smoke, spears of lightning and darts of plasma. He sees a fallen city and, across it, entwined with it, another city from another place, that has burrowed into it like the roots of a tree, and fused with it like a parasite. He sees the appalling immensity of the outer void, the ever-blackness, the slide and swirl and flutter of the things residing in that darkness, things too big to fully see or comprehend. He sees everything, all that is and was and will be.

'Look at their pathetic legions,' say the voices of Samus, ***'their ruptured hosts, their walking corpses, living to kill and killing to kill. There is no longer any point to their psychopathic exertions or their hysterical sacrifices. Nothing remains to be won or lost. Not now, not for them. Nothing survives of their motives, reasons or agendas.'***

'N-no…' Loken rasps, trying to turn his head away. His eyes won't close.

'Look! Do they not see it too? The past is gone, and there is no future. There is only now, and there is only war, and the war will burn for as long as there is fuel to feed it.'

It chuckles in his ear, right behind him.

'Which won't be long.'

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Mortal remains

The heart of the ship is quite dead. It is as though they are entering the innards of a cadaver that has mummified to a husk. Stanchions and walls look less like decaying plasteel, and more like dead flesh and meat that has calcified and fossilised. Hatches lean in their frames like perished leather, and in places, the ridges of the decking seem like desiccated vertebrae. Everything is bone-dry and brittle, and the light is dim, and fogged by a slow, lazy haze of drifting dust motes, some of which catch the spare light and glitter briefly.

‘You said…’ Sanguinius begins. ‘You said he would be here.’

Ferrus Manus looks around uneasily.

‘He should be,’ he says.

‘Then where?’ Sanguinius asks. The pain of his wound aches in his side, and he can taste blood in his mouth.

He follows the Gorgon along the narrow path his first-lost brother has forged from the enveloping night. Their footsteps creak and crunch on the perished, powdery deck beneath them.

The constant whispers move with them, filling the shadows. Now and

then, groans and shrieks echo out of the darkness beyond them. Some seem to come from far away. Others, shrill and sudden, seem alarmingly close.

‘Something is here,’ says Sanguinius. ‘What are those sounds?’

‘The cries of the damned,’ says the Gorgon ahead of him, his voice as thin and distant as the screams. ‘Mostly dead shells. The husks of those who have gone.’

Encarmine shivers in Sanguinius’ hand. He realises he is gripping it too tightly. He strains to see, but there’s nothing to see except shadow. The wails of anguish ringing out of the blackness are deformed by extremities of pain, yet there is no visible origin for any of them.

‘I know those voices,’ he whispers.

‘You do,’ says Ferrus.

‘Our… *brothers*,’ Sanguinius murmurs in horror.

‘Yes,’ says Ferrus. ‘Those, like me, who have fallen. And the mortal remains of those who have become other things.’

A fresh scream swirls the dust. There is a rage in it. Sanguinius knows that rage.

Angron…

‘The warp devours our souls,’ the Gorgon says. ‘Those lost, and those discarded alike. Magnus, the Pale King, Alpharius, the Red Angel… it spares no one. Death is not release, brother. It is unending torment. Lesson two, remember?’

Another shriek, oddly modulated by excruciating pain. Another familiar voice.

‘None of them are threats to you,’ says Ferrus lightly. ‘They wanted to be here, like me. They wanted to watch.’

‘No matter which side they stood on?’ Sanguinius asks, taut with dismay.

‘Of course.’

‘Who else?’ Sanguinius asks. He barely dares to, because the answer will hurt. Some of the sounds of pain are too vague to discern, faint wailing and plangent, drawn-out gasps. Who has fallen that he doesn’t know about? Is Rogal here? What of the others, the ones they were counting on? He had made himself believe they were coming, but who can say what fate might have befallen them since they last stood together. Is one of these shades Roboute? Is one of them Russ? The Lion? Corax? Do these screams represent not just brothers dead, but hope too? Does salvation lurk here,

wrapped in its winding sheet, forever thwarted?

Ferrus, trudging on, makes no answer. Dust motes drift.

‘What is it you all think you’re going to witness?’ Sanguinius asks.

‘The end,’ says Ferrus. ‘The death. Your last great act. There is one thing that unites us apart from blood, and blood spilled. We’re all here, in the end, because of him.’

‘Horus?’

‘This is where he’s brought us, brother,’ says Ferrus, with a sad smile, ‘in triumph and defeat, which look exactly alike from where we stand. Horus has won, the warp has triumphed. There’s no point any of us bickering about rights and wrongs. What’s done is done, no matter which side any of us took.

‘Or wish we hadn’t,’ he adds. ‘Or wish we’d had a choice in it.’

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6:xxxiv

Exoplanar breach

The rows of teeth crack into Berendol’s torso and pelvis. He doesn’t stop hacking. His blade rips an eye, and the thing shrieks, spitting him out. Berendol rolls, broken and drenched in bloody mucus, across the atrium’s cracked floor.

Enraged, the Neverborn beast gropes for him. It finds Molwae and Demeny instead. They’ve regained their wits, and come in swinging, side by side, putting themselves between the half-trapped beast and Berendol. It tries to haul more of itself into the atrium, deforming the doorway, straining its huge shoulders against the frame. It scrabbles for grip with its oversized hands, but the polished floor is slick with its blood. Molwae’s tactical spatha rakes deep across its left wrist, cutting an artery from which pressurised blood begins to pump and squirt, spattering the oil paintings and dappling the ceiling and far-end wall. The jetting blood, with the laminar force of a power hose, catches Molwae and throws him over.

Thane’s on his feet by then. He comes in like thunder, cracking knuckles and talons with his hammer-blows. The thing’s lurching antlers scrape the ceiling, tangle with electro-chandeliers that tear free and come crashing

down, ripping several of the great canvases off the wall. Molwae, upright again, spears his sword through the palm of one vast hand and pins it to the atrium wall. It tries to wrench free, but the spatha is through its hand-bones like a crucifixion nail. Molwae puts his weight and power into it, keeping the sword in place.

Demeny sees this, and turns to the other hand. His sword has broken against a raking talon, so he scoops up Berendol's fallen greatsword instead and, charging, runs it through the other hand, through the pad of the thumb, pinning it to the opposite wall.

Its shoulders wedged in the doorway, its hands staked to the walls, the Neverborn howls and struggles. Thane runs right up to its braying mouth, and brings his hammer down, two-handed, in a pile-driving blow that cracks the front of the cranium.

Dying, brain bruised and ruptured, it goes into spasms, and starts to thrash. Plaster chunks fall from the ceiling and burst like sugar-icing on the blood-wet floor. Thane ducks one scything, maddened branch of antlers. Molwae does not. A tine the length of a javelin impales him through the chest and lifts him off his feet. He's dead before the Neverborn's head drops with a sickening crunch and the antler slopes to slide him off.

The stink of gore is appalling. Thane is soaked in it. He works his hammer free with a grunt and pulls it out of the dented bone. He turns, controlling his breathing, and looks at Molwae, dead on his back.

Demeny draws Berendol's greatsword out, letting the giant hand flop to the floor like a filled body bag. He limps over to the veteran.

Berendol has not risen since the thing spat him out. The trauma to his armour, from thigh to throat, and the extent of his wounds, is obvious even from where Thane is standing.

Demeny kneels down. He unclasps Berendol's helm. The Huscarl is still breathing. He has aspirated blood inside his visor, and his face is a red mask out of which heavy eyes blink wearily.

'Huscarl,' says Demeny, and offers the sword, hilt first. A man should always die with his sword.

'You take it, prentice-brother,' Berendol says. Then nothing else, ever again.

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6:xxxv

Fragments (no way in, no way out)

Beaten to the point of death, the final fortress flinches and shudders. It is suddenly carrying massive internal injuries. It is bleeding out inside.

Sensing this, sensing their prey weaken and falter, the enemy hosts around the Delphic redouble their efforts. Behind them, across the ravaged Palatine and the overrun ruinscapes of the Dominions beyond, the rest of Horus Lupercal's vast invasion force surges forward to follow and support the wall-breaking vanguard. This tide, this numberless and abominable tide, will annihilate any loyalist forces left in the burning Palatine, engulfing all resistance in its efforts to reach the crumbling walls.

Blood streams down the haggard face of the final fortress. It fills the cavities and chambers inside it.

Honfler yells to keep his companies in line as the traitor forces surge down the Martian Approaches towards them, but he has no companies left. Their losses are now sixty per cent. The surviving battle-brothers, weathering a torrent of shots, have been driven back against the ice-clagged engine gates, leaving a carpet of their dead behind them.

Bolt-rounds tear into them, and smash against the gates at their backs, showering them with flame and shrapnel.

‘I will not die like this, son-of-Dorn,’ Sartak snarls.

‘You have an alternative in mind, Wolf?’ Honfler yells back.

‘Charge them,’ Sartak replies without hesitation. He fires his last bolter shell and tosses the empty weapon aside. ‘Charge the bastards. It’s the last thing they’ll expect.’

Enemy fire tears through the men beside him. A Salamander drops, blown open. Rewa Medusi is thrown against the gates, his head and chest destroyed, and slides to the ground.

‘Impressive deeds?’ Honfler growls.

‘Impressive deeds, praetor-captain,’ Sartak replies. They won’t last long, but they’ll take more with them. ‘Just keep up with me,’ Sartak says, unshipping his war-axe. ‘Can you do that?’

Honfler raises his sword to give the order.

The postern hatch behind him smashes open. Something long and boneless, like a tentacle limb, whips out faster than the eye can track. It grabs Honfler from behind, and slams him through the hatch so hard and so fast flecks of yellow paint mark the dented frame where his arms and head have struck it. He’s just gone. Gone in an instant. Gone into the blackness.

Sartak yells his name. He grabs up the praetor-captain’s fallen gladius and, sword in one hand and axe in the other, lunges mindlessly towards the hatchway to find him.

More tentacles lash out to meet him.

The Sanctum Imperialis winces. It rocks, like a grievously wounded man too tired and hurt to remain on his feet. Perhaps it is only still standing because of the architecture of the Inevitable City that is extruding and boring through its fabric, winding like a parasite through its host, keeping it upright when it is all but dead?

The long companions are all uneasy. John Grammaticus knows they all have the same sense of being watched, and that the fidgeting scuttle haunts the edges of their vision. Even Actae seems jumpy and distracted by things even her mind cannot quite see. John knows how vulnerable they are. They have no weapons. They’ve unpacked and ditched the negation crate. Oll has

pocketed his silver compass, jet pendulum and his notebook, along with the knife. It's the only thing of power they have, but John doubts it'll be all that handy in a fight. Leetu has recovered his tarot deck, still troubled by the Dark King card that was not in it before. John's regained possession of the aeldari shears and the torquetum that Eldrad gifted him. The clew of thread on its fid has been given to Zybes for safekeeping.

They reach an old marketplace where thistles are growing between flagstones. Two sides of the square are jumbled timbered buildings that look medieval. The tight-shouldered buildings are rotting. The third side of the square is the dull grey wall of a drive compartment, fluted with thick pipes. The fourth side is the golden facade of a Palatine court, columned and draped with amaranthine hangings. It is festooned with grey creepers and blighted tangleweed. They stop to rest.

Leetu arms himself with a cast iron riser-post from a stretch of railings. It's no tactical gladius or power maul, but it's something. Krank fashions a makeshift cudgel from a broken length of ceramite pipe. John wonders what Krank thinks he'll fight off with it, but just wielding something, anything, seems to make Krank feel better.

While Actae rests for a few minutes, restoring her strength, Katt tears a strip of cloth from the hem of her tunic, gathers some stones and chunks of broken tile, none of them bigger than a hen's egg, and makes herself a crude slingshot. She's resourceful. John can tell she's done it before. She looses a test stone with a flick on the underswing, and it sails across the yard and dents a gutter.

John nods approvingly.

'I was aiming for the window,' she whispers, disappointed. He hasn't got the heart to tell her that whatever they're likely to encounter, it will present a target big enough for that margin of error not to matter.

John wonders where she learned the knack. After all this time, he doesn't know anything about any of them. He doesn't even know Katt's full name. But they are as close as blood now, close as family. Like Oll, John doesn't need to know the details any more, because he knows what he needs to know. He's never had companions this true before. He'll never have companions like them again.

He wonders if he should ask more questions, probe them for more details. But why? There isn't time, and why does he need to know any more? It's

not as if he’s taking notes. It’s not as though anyone’s going to record their misadventures for posterity.

Unless the city, observing them ominously from every dim pane of glass and alien shadow, is remembering every terrified step they take.

But it doesn’t feel as personal as that. There is a disdainful vacancy in its anonymity, as though it is waiting and watching for everyone and everything, and knows, contemptuously, that everyone and everything will eventually arrive by means of some grim inevitability. The long companions are mere interlopers, accidental visitors, and of no importance.

The city is waiting for more honoured guests to arrive.

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6:xxxvi

Face him

His voice is more distant than ever before, yet his form is right in front of Sanguinius.

‘Some of us are glad to behold the Triumph of Ruin,’ Ferrus says, ‘some of us are sad. All of us are consigned to agony. None of us got what we wanted. Even those of us that asked for it. The Pantheon’s gifts are never as wonderful as they seem. We are obliged to accept the choices we made.’

‘So you are assembling here… as at a funeral?’

‘You might say,’ says Ferrus. ‘A wake. We have willed ourselves here from torment, or been allowed to come. I don’t know, brother. But it could only happen now. This one moment in history. Horus has snapped the rules of Creation so fundamentally, even this impossibility is permissible. We are drawn together in respect, drawn by memories, by grief and regret. One thing unites us all. We’re here because of him. He did this to us.’

The distant, tremulous shrieks rise in fury, then ebb.

‘Ruin may triumph,’ says Ferrus, ‘but he shouldn’t. We want him to suffer.’

The first-lost pauses, and turns to look at Sanguinius. His face is in

shadow, and half-veiled by the drifting dust.

‘You can’t win, brother,’ he says, ‘but you can go down fighting and cut the bastard’s throat. For us. We know you can, if anyone can. We’ve always known. You, the brightest of us. The best of us.’

The sizzling screams increase in pitch to underscore the words.

‘Kill him for us, brother,’ says Ferrus. ‘Kill him for us and for all the damnable things he has done. You have nothing to lose. Not any more. Angron made sure of that. Avenge us.’

‘I…’ Sanguinius begins.

The screams drown him out for a moment. Their reverberations make the deck tremble and loft more slow particles of dust into the dry air.

‘They are frustrated with you,’ says Ferrus. ‘And so am I.’

‘Why?’ asks Sanguinius.

‘You delay,’ says Ferrus, his mouth drawn down in a scowl. ‘You linger.’

‘I do not,’ Sanguinius replies. ‘You said he would be here.’

‘And he should be,’ the Gorgon snaps. ‘And he *would* be, if it was your will. But you do not will it. You say you are ready, but you’re not. Not at all. Not in your heart.’

‘You’re wrong,’ says Sanguinius. ‘Facing him is the only reason I–’

‘Then face him!’ Ferrus Manus growls. The fury inside him is making his gleaming necrodermis bubble and sweat. ‘If you mean it, face him! Kill him!’

‘I’ll face him, brother,’ says Sanguinius, ‘but I don’t know if I can kill him. If he is grown so powerful–’

‘No,’ says Ferrus. ‘You know you can. You just don’t know if you *want* to.’

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6:xxxvii

All is lost

Rann strikes the gun-box wall again. He's struck it a hundred times already, cracking off the red-painted surface and chewing into the thick rockcrete beneath, but he's barely dug a crater. He pauses, reaches into the shattered hole, and drags out more lumps of broken 'crete, letting them scatter on the floor. Then he listens again, as he has listened after every three or four blows.

The whisper is still there, no closer, no clearer, continuing its steady discourse, apparently undisturbed by the steady thump of Rann's impacts. His gene-sire's voice, or a trick, or both, dulled by rock and distance, hollowed by time.

Rann calls Dorn's name again, but there is no answer.

The rockcrete is military grade, hardened with plasteel rebar. Rann hefts the maul to swing again. It's a World Eaters weapon, a flanged mace, that he reluctantly took from a corpse in the mire outside to spare the edges of his axes. The head is already buckled. He spits cement dust, hoists the mace, brings his arms back.

'You should stop.'

Rann looks around. Zephon is standing in the gun-box doorway.

‘Stop,’ says Zephon.

‘I can’t,’ says Rann. ‘I can’t just…’

‘You can’t dig a hole through this bunker,’ says Zephon. ‘Not even you. Not even with years to waste. Your lord and master built these walls to last. To withstand.’

‘My lord and master–’ Rann snarls.

‘I know,’ says Zephon. ‘Baldwin told me. I don’t know what’s behind that wall. I don’t even know how thick it is. Ten metres? Twenty? But I know it’s not him waiting on the other side. The warp is tormenting you, brother, forcing you to waste your strength on a futile effort. Stop.’

‘I’ll decide what’s futile,’ says Rann.

Zephon shakes his head. ‘No, you won’t,’ he says. ‘Our enemy will. It’s begun. You’re needed. So stop.’

‘It’s begun?’

‘I’m informing you,’ says Zephon. ‘As you requested.’

Rann looks at the mutilated mace in his hands. He looks at the ragged hole he’s made in the wall. Not a lot to show for such prolonged labour.

He tosses the mace onto the spill of rubble, picks up his helm, and heads for the doorway. Zephon has already turned and gone. Rann takes one last glance at the wall.

‘I will… come back,’ he promises.

Clamping his helm in place, he catches up with Zephon. The bunker hallway is gloomy and tight, and the air is already filmed with dust shaken from the ceiling. Thirty metres shy of the entrance, he can hear the swaddled thunder outside, the faint crackle of weapons. The ground is vibrating. Ahead of him, Zephon unclamps his twin volkite serpentas as he walks.

They emerge into the open, into the east quarter dug-outs. The fury is no longer muffled. Sounds are sharp and raw. The air itself is quaking.

As Archamus predicted, the enemy push has come. As Rann reaches the firing step, alongside Imperial Fists, White Scars and Blood Angels already blasting from the gun-slots, he glimpses the scale of the doom beyond. Black figures in the gusting smoke, thousands upon thousands, the flash and spit of weapons, the silhouettes of war-machine beasts looming through the firefields. Even inside the sealed fastness of his plate, the concussive noise

is infernal, the tornado voice of total war.

The enemy, led principally by Sons of Horus and World Eaters, it seems, has swept towards the Delphic in a mass fifty kilometres wide and thousands of units thick. Hasgard is simply an outcrop in the path of its deluge. But Hasgard is not the empty ruin the enemy expected. The forces Rann and his brothers have planted there, a paltry garrison in the face of such opposition, have laid down fire patterns to scourge anything that comes within range of the broken emplacements. Enemy dead litter the mudscape, lost beneath the feet and tracks of those that follow, unit after unit. Hasgard is nothing, just a rock dropped in a fast-moving stream, but its defiance is causing a section of the traitor host to swirl, to eddy around it, to break its onward rush and deform, turning back on itself and circling in an effort to surround and exterminate the obstruction.

It's not much. A spit in the sea. Neither Rann nor Archamus expected it to break the mass assault. But they've hindered it, irritated it, diverted and distracted a chunk of it, torn an untidy hole in the otherwise uniform advance. It's not much, but it's something, a final angry gesture of defiance in a war where angry gestures are all the loyalists have left.

The time of dying has begun, the time of last stands and sacrifices. Victory is entirely impossible. All that matters is honour; how you sell your life, how you make your death, how many lives you take before yours is gone, how many extra seconds you can buy before the inevitable triumphs. It is no longer about winning. It is about proclaiming your rejection of the foe, and all it stands for, to your last breath, in the vain hope that somehow, somewhere, somewhen, that statement will be remembered and will matter.

Somehow. It's all they have. A last chance to be sons of the Emperor, to reaffirm that loyalty, to scream *we were there* into the face of hell.

We were there, the day Horus slew the Emperor. We denied him to the last. We did not flinch. We made nothing easy for him. We died where we stood to show the unfathomable depth of our contempt for Horus Lupercal. We spat our lifeblood on him, our last words, our final breaths, our ultimate oaths in our ultimate moment.

Horus will not care. He will not be moved. He may not even notice us. We are a stone beneath his boot as he strides forward, a loose pebble, unnoticed dust on his heels, forgotten names, neglected bones.

We were nothing, but we stood anyway. We were there. For our sakes,

Lupercal, not yours, we were there, and we fought you to the very end.

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6:xxxviii

Avenge yourself

‘You don’t know if you want to, because it’s Horus,’ says Ferrus Manus. ‘Horus, whom we all loved. Know that if you do it, you will be saving him. Saving him as he was. As we adored him. He can be here with us, in this place where division and recrimination no longer matter.’

‘Alongside you?’ Sanguinius asks.

‘And you,’ says Ferrus. He looks into his brother’s eyes. Fury smokes in his silver pupils. ‘Sorry, but it’s true,’ he says. ‘You know it is. Time has run out, and you are as dead as the rest of us. But there’s one thing you don’t know. That pain you feel?’

‘Yes?’

‘That crippling pain that you carry as a burden… It’s not death pulling you in, brother. It’s not the wound in your flank. The pain you feel is the loss of Horus. We all feel it. And it does you credit, but put it aside now. Lesson four. The Horus Lupercal we loved is long gone. Don’t let grief stay your hand. There’s no time for grief. Only vengeance. Avenge us. Avenge yourself. Avenge Horus.’

Sanguinius steps back. The screams have died away. The darkness has

gone cold and quiet.

‘Is that what haunts me?’ he asks.

Ferrus nods.

‘It seems so obvious,’ says Sanguinius. He swallows hard to clear his throat. ‘But I couldn’t see it. Now you say it, I do. I miss him very much. So very much.’

‘Then honour his memory,’ says Ferrus. ‘And know that he would have done the same for you.’

Sanguinius stands for a second, and looks at his lost brother.

‘If you are a trick of the warp,’ he says, ‘you’re a good one.’

‘We are all of the warp,’ says Ferrus. ‘But we are no trick. The warp is all things. Horus doesn’t realise quite what he could do if he found his focus. Stop him before he does.’

‘I will,’ says Sanguinius. There is nothing but certainty in his voice.

‘Then you’ve found him,’ says Ferrus. He turns and nods towards the darkness ahead. ‘This path will take you directly to him,’ he says. ‘Any path will. Any path you choose. You feel that chill? The False Gods know your will is set. They may try to stop you. Try to kill you, even. But your path is set, and they know it.’

Sanguinius steps forward.

‘Lead the way,’ he says.

Ferrus shakes his head.

‘No,’ he replies. ‘You lead now. You know the way. You need no guide from here. But I’ll walk with you, as far as I can.’

He ushers, with one alloyed hand. Sword raised, Sanguinius steps past him and starts to walk. He can feel Ferrus Manus following him into the darkness.

He doesn’t look back.

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6:xxxix

Follow

‘Trooper Persson?’

Oll turns, and sees Graft. The bulk cultivation servitor is clasping the empty negation crate between its forward manipulators. It’s too easy to think that Graft has simply followed Oll, because Oll is its owner and master, and Graft has been pre-coded to obey. The servitor has long exceeded any bounds or limits of its programmed parameters and obedience algorithms. In its own odd, simple fashion, Graft has shown a devotion so pure it puts Oll’s faith to shame.

‘What?’ Oll asks quietly.

‘Are we leaving this behind?’ Graft asks, swivelling its optics to focus on the crate.

‘It’s empty,’ says Oll.

‘So we can put things in it,’ says Graft.

‘We’ve got nothing to put in it.’

‘Yet,’ Graft replies. ‘But I can carry it until then. It is not useful now, but it might be. We keep things because we understand they will be useful later. Like sacks, in the store. Or rolls of baling cord, in the store. Or drums of

fence wire, in the store.’

Oll thinks of Graft in the farmhab sheds, running its daily inventory of agricultural supplies.

‘I suppose so,’ he says.

‘I will carry it,’ says Graft. The servitor rotates its torso section, and places the duralloy box carefully on its payload carrier. ‘You taught me to be practical and anticipate needs, Trooper Persson,’ it says. ‘I will find a purpose for it. A sack is just a sack until it is filled with grain, but it is always a grain sack. A wire is just a wire until it is strung out along fence posts, but it is always a fence.’

Oll nods. He’s so tired, everything sounds like gnostic philosophy.

They start walking again. Tension hangs over them. Dead windows gaze at them. A wind they can’t feel moans its lament. They follow streets that are also deck-spaces, and palatial colonnades that are also alleys. The feeling that they are being watched by something does not go away. They climb the rutted steps of terraces between derelict buildings, and ascend steep cobbled lanes that never seem to reach a summit or a brow. They pass below the spans of Palatine viaducts or the spars of engine compartment pipework, and cross decaying bridges over gorges into which the pale daylight refuses to venture. They cross market yards, and audience plazas, and open training decks where derelict practice cages still stand.

Everywhere is breathlessly still, except the edges of their vision, where things seem to writhe and crawl. But when they turn to look directly, there’s nothing there.

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6:xl

Because it matters

Loken can’t bear to look any more. The void below, the burning world, it’s too much.

‘Look at the rock that they call the world,’ the daemon sniggers in his ear. ***‘It is being dismantled wholesale by a relentless concentration of absolute fury. They fight–’***

Loken tries to turn his head away. The daemon grips him harder and twists it back, forcing him to see.

‘Look at them!’ it snarls. ***‘They fight for the world, by dismembering the world. They think the world is so important. They believe it matters. The mindless killers on each side, their labels of traitor and loyalist long since erased by flame, they still think the place matters, the rock that they kill on and for.’***

‘Because it does!’ Loken screams. The daemon’s grip is so tight it’s almost snapping his neck. He closes his eyes, but he can still see the blazing fury of Terra far below. The daemon pushes him forward, further through the ragged hull breach, clutching him like a toy. Loken thinks it’s going to cast him out there, hurl him away like an offering onto the Throneworld pyre

far, far below. A fiery death, though it feels infinitely preferable to the torture of the daemon's constricting grip and the caustic bellow of its voice.

'It matters,' Loken gasps. 'It matters to us. It matters to me! And to the Emperor and the lord primarchs… They think–'

'Think…' The daemon chuckles. ***'Well, that is too strong a word. None of them are* thinking *any more…'***

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6:xli

‘In that moment, the universe changed.’

‘“But I will say some impulse, then,”’ Mauer reads, ‘“some twitch in the lizard brains, that convinces them, in their inchoate frenzy, that they are standing their ground, that they are fighting for what is theirs. Some birthright, some cradle, some legacy, some place that belongs to them and to which they belong, as though such connections matter…”’

She looks up. In the cold gloom of the library, she can see Sindermann’s face. He’s listening intently to her, but he looks terrified. Nearby, the young archivist is listening with her hand to her mouth, as though if she takes the hand away, they’ll be able to hear her sob.

‘Do you want me to stop?’ Mauer asks.

Sindermann shakes his head.

‘No,’ he manages to say.

‘It’s upsetting you,’ she says. She glances at the cover of the book. ‘I mean, it’s demented stuff, the ravings of a madman, but no stranger than anything else we’ve found.’

Sindermann mutters something.

‘What?’ Mauer asks.

‘I said, n-not a madman,’ says Sindermann. ‘Not a man at all. Samus was… the first.’

‘The first what?’

‘The first of its kind we met,’ he says. He clamps one hand with the other to stop it trembling. ‘The first recorded encounter, anyway. I was with the Sixty-Third Expeditionary on Sixty-Three Nineteen. The Whisperheads Compliance. Have you read the files?’

Mauer shakes her head.

‘No doubt they’re restricted.’ Sindermann sighs. ‘Though they would have provided valuable reference for your Prefectus. Once again, He keeps things from those who should know them.’

‘What happened at the Whisperheads, sir?’ the archivist asks quietly.

‘We met one of the Neverborn,’ says Sindermann. ‘It… killed a number of people. Remembrancers. Luna Wolves. It possessed at least one of Lupercal’s men, Xavyer Jubal. It called itself Samus.’

‘You saw it?’ asks Mauer.

Sindermann nods with a shudder. ‘I’ve never forgotten it, boetharch. It spoke to us. It taunted us. In that moment, the universe changed. The secret came out, the secret He had hidden for so long. We realised that everything we knew about materia and the warp was wrong. Or, if not wrong, then incomplete. Loken was there. Keeler too. Our lives were not the same after that. And Horus, of course. I sometimes think that was the moment when the first crack in his psyche appeared. It shocked him, you see? He realised he had been lied to. He realised there was more to learn. I think what happened to him after that, happened more easily because his eyes had been opened. He was aware.’

‘It’s so odd to hear you speak of him fondly,’ says Mauer.

Sindermann shrugs. ‘It’s hard for us to remember, though it’s supposed to be my purpose to be an instrument of remembering… it’s hard for us to remember how wonderful he was. He was… extraordinary. I have met primarchs, and I have been awed by them all, but him… Dear me, that’s the smallest and greatest tragedy of this time, I think. The fact that we lost him. That such a great man became… this scourge of humanity. This… whatever he is now.’

He blows on his hands for warmth, thoughtful.

‘Samus, though,’ he muses, ‘is a recurring force. An exoplanar thing.

There at the start, and then during the Solar defence… Oh, poor, poor Mersadie. The creature is like a herald, a patron daemon of incitement and revolt, a harbinger of ruin–’

Mauer looks down at the book in her hands.

‘I’ll stop,’ she says.

‘No,’ says Sindermann. ‘It’s terrifying to think that thing’s words are recorded anywhere. But think, Mauer. Loken was there when we met Samus, and Loken was just here with us. A moment later, we find that book. Isn’t that precisely the kind of synchronicity we have been hunting for?’

‘You think there’s something useful in this?’ she asks.

‘I think it’s the surest and closest connection we have,’ Sindermann replies. ‘Samus is of the Neverborn. A thing of the warp. Those words are closer to first-hand truth than anything we’ve found in this place. Read the rest. Ignore my discomfort. Read the rest.’

‘Do you think these words are… something we can use?’ Mauer asks. ‘The kind of thing we came here looking for? A spell? An invocation?’

‘They may have no power at all,’ Sindermann says. ‘But read them anyway.’

Mauer pauses, then re-opens the book and looks for the place where she left off.

‘“As though such connections matter,”’ she reads, finding her place again. ‘“They do not. Only by some tenuous and sentimental thread are they tied together, world and species, some whim, some happenstance, a freak division of biological contamination that gave rise to their ephemeral lineage on that irrelevant rock. That’s all. It could have been anywhere. It happened to be here…”’

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6:xlii

Found, not finding

Smoke, grey and oily, hangs over some parts of the randomly blended city. These areas, when they reach them, are torn and burned ruins, or churned crater-scapes of shell-holes. Heat radiates from them, and there are the blackened remnants of roasted war machines sunk in the mud. These areas, Oll presumes, are not Inner Sanctum, or *Vengeful Spirit*, or Inevitable City: they are smouldering intrusions of the Outer Palace warscape, the Palatine, Anterior and Magnificans, folded into the mix. There are signs of death in these places – scraps of bloody uniform, buckled pieces of armour, the occasional ruined weapon – but no bodies. He sees bloodstains on the broken brick and cracked stone, but the corpses that lay there are gone. It is not, Oll thinks grimly, as though the bodies have vanished. From streaks of gore and marks in the dirt, it seems they have been dragged away by something. Are there scavengers here, predators, carrion-eaters? Are there wolves, or worse, in this city?

Is that why it feels like they are being watched?

They mount the stone staircase of what seems like a huge city wall, a great edifice of sooty black stone. They see it from a distance, rising over the

rooftops, and it seems to take hours to reach it. Oll hopes it's the limit of the city and that, from the top, they'll be able to see a great distance beyond. To what, he doesn't know. On the way up, Leetu notices marks scratched into the dirty stone. They stop to look. Oll can't make much sense of the marks, which look like they have been gouged with an awl or a broken blade. They seem like plans, like schemes of attack or defence, little sketches of tactical deployment. There are many of them. Some are scratched out. As they go further up the stairs, they find more, as though someone had worked and reworked some scheme, then crossed it out, moved to another patch of wall, and started over.

'What does it mean?' John whispers.

Oll shrugs. 'I doubt anyone remembers any more,' he whispers back. He's impatient. He wants to get to the top and see what lies beyond the wall.

But from the top, a broad and ruined battlement that runs zigzag across the spread of roofs below, there's nothing to see except more walls, higher walls, towering and shadowed cliffs of ceramite and stone. The distant walls are veiled by mist. The sky is like dark glass. There's some sense of a light source, a sun or a star, but it's obscured by the thick pall of the sky.

Oll realises that there are figures on the top of the distant walls. They are kneeling, unmoving. He realises how big they must be.

Then he realises what they are.

They are war engines of the Adeptus Titanicus. They are rusted, burned-out and quite dead. They have been left, kneeling as if in prayer or in abject fealty, along the crest of the great walls.

'Good… god…' John murmurs.

'Look!' Zybes hisses as loud as he dares.

They all turn. He's found another thread. It's tied to a crenellation of the wall's rampart.

'We're going the right way,' Zybes whispers, not even reassuring himself.

The loops of red thread which Zybes, or someone that Zybes will be one day, has left behind him are their only guide. There is no other reliable navigation. John's torquetum reads nothing, and Oll's compass spins frenetically, unable to fix. The devices that have taken them through time and space, between stars, through the wings of the galaxy's great theatre, are useless here. There's no operational time and space left to read.

But the threads remain. They find them every forty or fifty metres, and

Zybes examines each one with trembling hands.

Oll doesn't know how they're finding them. It's not as if the loops of thread point the way, or indicate the position of the next. The long companions just walk, and there's another. And the clew of thread in Zybes' hand has not grown any smaller.

It occurs to Oll that maybe they're not finding the threads at all.

Maybe the threads are finding them.

And if the threads can find them, what else can?

The first spots of rain begin to fall, light at first, then heavy and loud. Oll is certain, in his gut, that the ominous threat or promise of rain has lingered over this grey city forever, never falling, always about to.

It's falling now. Something is changing.

His left eyelid twitches. He looks behind him.

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6:xliii

Overheard

Sycar raises his hand. ‘You hear that?’ he asks.

Abaddon can hear wastewater dripping, the soft machine purr and structure-creak of the flagship around them. But yes, he heard it. A voice. A whisper in the darkness.

…they tied together, world and species, some whim, some happenstance…

He glances back. He and Sycar have taken point. The assault squads of their companies, led by Baraxa, company captains Jeraddon and Yrmand, and Praetor-Captain Phaeto Zeletsis, are fanned out behind them in the wide and gloomy passageways. He can see them waiting, weapons ready, listening. They can hear it too.

A whisper. A woman’s voice–

No. Several voices, murmuring the same words. An echo that makes his skin crawl. It’s the Neverborn. A Neverborn deceit. They’re in everything, soaked into every atom of the ship’s fabric, in the walls, the deck, the pipework. His father has allowed this abominable saturation to occur.

‘Ignore it,’ Abaddon says. He signals advance.

The Sons of Horus begin to move again, with oiled, silent precision.

Leading the way, Abaddon hears the whispers bleeding from the shadows again.

It could have been anywhere. It happened to be here…

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6:xliv

The way of everything

‘This lump of matter, this scrap of earth, this…’

The daemon pauses. It twists Loken away from the hull breach to face him. It holds him, and stares into his eyes.

‘What do they call it?’ it hisses. ***‘Terror? Ha! No, Terra.’***

‘I abjure you, daemon,’ Loken growls. He feels blood running down his face inside his helm. Blood, and tears. ‘It’s the Throneworld. The Emperor must live, and Terra must stand, against all the outer powers and all your kind. Humanity believes–’

‘Their minds invest it with significance,’ chides the daemon, crooning the words. ***‘Their language gives it a name, oh so mockable. It is just a rock, of infinite rocks, swirling around infinite suns. It has no meaning, no special property, no singular quality. Yet how they fight for it!’***

It wrenches him around again, and holds him at arm’s length, through the tattered rent in the *Spirit*’s hull. The gulf boils below him. Stars flare and burst. Eyes peer from the darkness. A furnace shrouds the face of the world, tumbling sparks like fireflies. The vista of Aeternity opens so wide, the scale assaults Loken’s mind and numbs it.

He sees. He sees too much. As some flickering, narcotic hallucination, the nature of things falls into place, the order, the disorder, concordia, discordia, materia and immateria. The daemon is subjecting him to torment, perhaps out of spite or to exact vengeance, but the torment is doing more than mere punishment. It's ripping open his soul, and letting insight flood into the raw core of his being. He sees things as they are, as only a handful of people have ever seen them. He understands things as only one or perhaps two people ever have.

He sees the way of everything.

Unless *that* is the punishment.

'Look at them,' the daemon blurts, its voice ragged and thick with phlegm. ***'They fight, because war is the only thing they have left. They fight to conquer or deny, driven by the notion, which is utterly devoid of meaning, that it matters who wins here. Who claims the rock. Who is left standing at the end. It does not. It does not. It does not. Futile!'***

'You're wrong,' Loken gasps. He can see that now.

'They are wrong,' the daemon declares. ***'Pathetic and wrong. Look at them. Fools all, deluded by incoherent compulsion and debased ideals. This place, this Terra, has never been special. It's been a symbol, at best, for a short span of time, and even that symbolic value is now exhausted. They burn themselves up in one last convulsion of psychosis, utterly unaware that the fight is not here.'***

'No?' growls Loken. 'Then where is it, Neverborn?'

'It is everywhere,' Samus cackles.

'And what do you know?' Loken asks. The daemon's grip is about to break his spine, and his senses are swimming. He knows he's going to die, and he doesn't care. His sanity is unravelling. The daemon, in its sport with him, has shared its exoplanar perspective, imagining such insight would be the cruellest retribution for Loken's defiance all those years before in the haunted Whisperheads. How deliciously amusing to show him the truth he has searched for, and let it immolate him!

But the daemon is wrong. Loken is Astartes. He was made to suffer. Made to endure. What he sees, what he understands, though terrible, is simply the truth. And the truth was all that ever mattered. He knows no fear, not any more.

'You're nothing,' says Loken. 'Just a figment. A phantom. Kyril taught me

so, and you've shown me more. You're just a current of the immaterium that thinks it's real, a false sentience, born spontaneously from empyric patterns, a false daemon, a false god, a thing that formed in an instant and will be gone again just as fast. You're nothing. I abjure you. I reject you. What even *are* you, you bastard?'

The daemon roars. Its rage ignites, and for an instant, Loken feels its grip on him clench. His armour will rupture and he'll burst inside it.

But it drags him back inside the ship and hurls him across the access corridor. Loken bounces off the inner wall with enough force to dent the panelling and crack his right pauldron, then hits the deck and slides to rest.

He tries to get up. His limbs are on fire. His heart is burning.

Hunched over, towering, the daemon advances on him, each footfall gouging the deck and leaving smouldering prints.

'My name is Samus,' it screams at him. ***'Samus is my name.'***

'Is it?' says Loken. He has hauled himself upright. Leaning against the wall, he tries to limp backwards as it descends upon him. 'No one cares. No one!'

'That is the only name you'll hear,' it growls, lunging at him.

Loken throws himself aside, and talons shred the wall. He shoulder-rolls onto his feet, and as he rises, draws his swords – Rubio's blade and *Mourn-It-All* – over his shoulders. His hands are shaking.

'That's *not* all I hear,' Loken spits. Claws snag at him, and he fends them off with a keen parry. 'I hear other voices. Echoes of the voices you've stolen. I hear one in particular. Do you hear it, daemon? Another voice, speaking your words a second before you do?'

'I am the one who walks behind you,' the daemon crows, suddenly at his back, but Loken has already wheeled around, knowing where the next strike would come from. The echo is real. He can hear it, one voice that has separated from the others that bind up to make the daemon's speech. A woman's. He thought at first it was Mersadie, but it's not. It's a woman's voice, saying the same words as the daemon, but a heartbeat in advance, like a prompt. Rubio's blade flashes and sparks as it deflects a raking talon.

'I am the footsteps at your back,' Samus hisses, but Loken has already uttered the same words, repeating what the echo has recited. The daemon quails back, shocked, disturbed by his prey's behaviour. It whimpers.

'You can hear it too, can't you?' says Loken, flexing his grip and circling

the monstrous thing. ‘Where’s it coming from, eh? That voice? It knows exactly what you’re going to say. It says it before you can, as if you’re just a puppet. A bubble of the warp with no mind of your own.’

‘I am the man beside you,’ the daemon roars, but Loken has already exclaimed that too, gouging *Mourn-It-All* across the daemon’s left flank. The daemon utters a piercing hog-squeal.

‘Look out!’ Loken goads. ‘I am all around you.’

The daemon rasps and bares its teeth. Toxic vapour billows from its nostrils. Pink ichor dribbles from the wound in its flank.

‘You don’t like it, do you?’ says Loken. ‘That voice, it’s mocking you. Where is it coming from? Do you know? If you know so much, tell me that. What is the voice that’s making you look so ridiculous? It sounds like someone I know. It sounds like Mauer. I don’t know how that could be. But I know it’s showing you’re just a hollow lie.’

Samus wails and lashes down at Loken. Rubio’s blade, sizzling with an almost white, steadfast fire, blocks its paw, and *Mourn-It-All* tears meat from its arm.

‘What are you now?’ Loken growls, breaking the clinch and leaping back, swords ready in a double-proffer. ‘What are you, now I’m not afraid of you any more?’

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6:xlv

Mere repetition

‘“Samus! I am the end and the death. I tell you now, I have seen this before, so many times,”’ says Mauer in the darkness. She pauses, and clears her throat. Sindermann can see how pale she is, how hard she’s finding each word to utter. ‘“How many, I do not care to say. Time is worthless to me, and I do not bother to remember all the biological contaminations that spurt up, and I don’t have the patience to memorise the names of rocks. Rocks are just rocks, and my name is Samus–”’

‘Stop,’ Sindermann says.

‘“Samus will gnaw upon your bones–”’

‘Mauer, stop now,’ says Sindermann, reaching out to her. It’s as though she’s in a trance. ‘It’s not doing anything, Mauer. The words are meaningless–’

‘“This – look at them kill! – this is mere repetition,”’ she stammers. ‘“The cycle, the dawn and the nightfall–”’

‘Stop, Mauer! We were wrong. It’s not a spell, it’s not anything we can use–’

‘“It will happen again,”’ Mauer gasps, stumbling and slurring now, ‘“and

it is happening everywhere. It is trivial. A dynastic quarrel. A fight–”’

‘It’s just hurting you, Mauer! Stop it, I say! We were wrong! We can learn nothing from this!’

‘“–a f-fight between nests of insects that I might step over, without noticing, on my long walk to somewhere else–”’

Sindermann snatches the book from her hands and hurls it to the floor. The touch of it has raised instant blisters on his fingers. Despite the stinging pain, he catches her as she sways forward.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispers. ‘I’m so sorry I made you do that, Mauer.’ He holds her tightly, keeping her upright. She weeps into his shoulder.

‘I’m sorry,’ whispers Sindermann. ‘I thought it would do some good. Grant some revelation. But it didn’t do anything at all.’

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6:xlvi

The beautiful potential

The voice has gone, even the echo of it. But the daemon has receded too. Three more deep, ruthless strikes from Loken's blades have forced it to its knees. It is not as large as it was. It's shrunk, becoming a spavined, emaciated thing, no bigger than he is. It is as though all the wild energy has bled out of it, deflating its swollen, grotesque mass to a suppurating sack of skin and knotted bones. Loken can see layers of its material form peeling away and dissolving, sloughing like snakeskin, melting like wax, dripping to the deck, and turning to steam. It shivers. Ichor, thin as watery gruel, seeps from its ghastly wounds. It wails, piteously, and slowly turns its rotting face to look up at him, as though pleading for mercy.

'You're done,' says Loken. 'You're nothing.'

'Unless…' it gasps.

'Unless?'

'Unless one of them finally notices what is possible,' it murmurs. Its voice is frail, the rage and volume lost, the multitude too. Its mumble is the radio pulse of a distant, dying star, the squeaking crackle of cosmic background radiation, the spit of dimming logs in a grate, the mutter of a

voice heard indistinctly through a thick wall.

‘Meaning?’ asks Loken warily.

‘What might be accomplished here,’ it sighs. It blinks up at him, pleading and pathetically desperate. ***‘The potential, the beautiful potential, which, though none of them sees it – none of them – is closer at hand than they realise. I can almost taste it. It is closer than it has ever been.’***

Loken shakes his head.

‘I’ve seen this,’ he says. ‘You showed it all to me. It won’t happen. I won’t let it happen. Mankind won’t let it happen.’

The daemon starts to sob. The eager spark in its black eyes fades, and it turns its head away from him. It spits stringy blood and a dislodged tooth onto the deck.

‘Who among them has the courage to reach for it?’ it whines. ***‘So few of them, so very few, are even in a position to see it or comprehend its meaning. I can count them upon my fingers.’***

It raises a broken paw, and extends a finger.

‘Him? The boastful king on his tiny throne, his feeble light guttering out?’

Another trembling finger extends.

‘Him? The squealing pretender, hunched in the howling gullet of hell?’ A third finger rises.

‘Him, perhaps? The maniac prophet slithering through the open wounds between unblinking stars?’

It glances at him, hunched and cowering.

‘One of them might see,’ it simpers, ***‘before it is too late, what could be achieved today. One of them might recognise, at the very last, that none of this matters… The annihilating rock, the measureless slaughter, the pathetic rage… Unless they elevate the war to where it truly belongs. Not here. Not Terra. But outwards and inwards and everywhere, until that which is Ruin, and that which is Ruin alone, as it was in the beginning and shall be at the end, is everywhere and everything–’***

‘This is the only victory that matters,’ Loken replies, and brings Rubio’s blade down in an execution stroke. The tattered daemon shrieks as it splits in two. Tangles of venting warpflux and voidmist billow out of its core as the torn halves of it topple to the deck.

Loken hears a bang, and feels the sudden drag of violent decompression.

Whatever magicks the daemon was commanding, whatever sorcery had suffused it, they have gone, and the impossibilities they sustained become material facts. The hole it tore in the ship’s hull is buckling outwards, hull plates cracking like eggshell and ripping like paper. Everything loose or unsecured in the access corridor starts to fly towards the rent: debris, shreds of metal, torn cables, rivets, fluids, even tattered scraps of the daemon’s carcass. The shriek of sucking air surrounds Loken, a hammering tide of power and wrath.

He starts to slide. He sheathes his blades and grabs a stanchion. The mag-plates of his boots activate automatically. Head down, one indomitable step after the next, he claws his way into the gale, splinters and fibres bouncing off him, boots clanging on the grille as they step and lock. He reaches the blast hatch and wrenches himself through as the deck plates begin to peel up and fly away behind him. He punches the emergency release.

The last glimpse he gets as the hatch smashes shut is of the daemon’s flopping corpse, split and disarticulated, carried away in a cloud of detritus like a cut banner lost in the wind. It hits the ragged lip of the hull breach on its way out, a glancing strike that tears it asunder, and then it’s gone.

And the hatch is shut. And the gale is stilled. And the runes on the wall panel flash amber as the circulation systems try to restore pressure.

And he is alone in the silence of the corpse ship.

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6:xlvii

Wordless

Abaddon listens.

‘The voice has stopped,’ says Sycar.

It has. The whispering voice, which seemed to Abaddon more like a thousand voices all wound together, has suddenly fallen silent. There’s no sound, except the background creak of the ship and the power-hum.

He’s about to signal a spread advance into the next range of hallways. There’s a sudden, violent bang. It sounds like a gunshot, but Abaddon recognises it. He’s heard it before, and he knows what it is before the klaxons start bleating and the amber warning runes begin their frantic blinking.

‘Handholds!’ he yells. ‘Lock down!’

Hull breach. Explosive decompression. The air starts to pull and whistle, dragging him forward, tugging at the warriors flanking him. Mag-plates engage. Abaddon grasps a wall strut to steady himself. The air starts screaming past them. The drag is immense, as though the corridor ahead is trying to inhale them. Dust and specks of grit and debris blizzard past them, flicking off their plate, caught in the gale, tumbling on past their locked

forms into the throat of the tunnel, screw-heads, chips of metal, loosed wires, fluttering scraps of paper.

And then it stops, as suddenly as it began. There's a thump, and the air stops moving. An emergency shutter's closed on automatic, sealing the voided area. Loose objects clatter to the deck, and the swirling dust sinks.

'The damn ship's coming apart,' growls Baraxa.

Abaddon ignores him. He straightens up. Torn pieces of paper are fluttering to rest around him like leaves. He snatches one out of the air.

Sycar has picked another up. 'What is this?' he asks.

Abaddon stares at the scrap in his hand. It's the page of a book, an old book, mottled with age-spots. It looks as if it's been torn out.

'Looks like… verse,' says Sycar.

Where the hell has this come from? Abaddon thinks. What does it mean? He doesn't even want to read it. First voices and whispers, now printed words. He crumples the sheet in his fist.

'Captain!'

A tactical squad led by Arnanod has moved ahead. Abaddon steps forward to join them, crossing into the next stretch of corridor. He sees what they've found. The floor here is not deck plate. It's old, worn carpet. The walls on both sides are lined with shelves. There are books on them, old books, parchment cases, folios. Some have fallen off, dragged by the decompression, and lie scattered, half-open on the floor.

He raises his weapon.

'Follow me,' he says.

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6:xlviii

As if by magick

The archivist glances nervously at Sindermann. He is on his feet in the thin pool of the stack light, holding Mauer tightly as she cries against him, her shoulders shaking. He is whispering calming, comforting words.

The archivist turns, and hurries along the row of shelves. She should fetch a glass of water. The poor woman is distraught. Perhaps something stronger. She's sure the chief archivist kept a bottle of good amasec in his office.

She rounds the end of the stack and stops in her tracks. There's someone there. A tall shadow, black-on-black, standing in the next aisle. It's not human tall. It's Astartes.

'Captain Loken, sir, have you retur–'

The words die in her mouth.

'Do you work here, child?' the shadow asks. Its voice is rich and soft, like bass woodwind.

She nods, because that's all she is able to do.

'I have come to withdraw books from this collection,' it says. 'While there is still time. Knowledge lives here, and it should not be lost.'

'Wh-wh-which b-books…?' she stammers.

‘All of them,’ the shadow replies.

It steps forward. Its motion activates the light above a painting on the wall, illuminating both the faded image of the Tower of Babel and the figure in front of it.

‘My name is Ahzek Ahriman,’ it says.

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6:xlix

Contact

‘Hurry!’ Thane urges. Demeny is close at his heels. Far too many empty hallways and vacant chambers, an illogical maze even by the labyrinthine standards of the Inner Sanctum Imperialis, have finally led them to something Thane recognises for certain. This fine, arched hall leads to the foot of the Provis Ascension, a grand, wide staircase of ouslite and travertine that rises to Viridium Plaza.

They mount the gleaming steps together, running. The Ascension rises ahead of them, like a stepped white mountain climbing into the sky. Thane can feel the air pulsing and the stone beneath his feet shivering. He hopes it’s the transmitted concussion of the wall guns shaking the Palace.

He knows it’s not.

The tiled walls of the Ascension should not be laced with hairline cracks as though they are being compressed from above. The electro-flambeaux should not be swinging as if tugged by a strong wind. There shouldn’t be threads of smoke in the air. The daylight at the top of the soaring steps should not be pulsing and quivering.

Near the top of the great staircase, he sees the first body. An Excertus

colonel, on his back, torso opened like a rose in bloom by a bolter round. Beyond him, two more, a Pan-Pac Seventh sergeant curled as though asleep, a rifleman from the Danube Allegiance impaled on an iron skewer.

Then a Custodian.

The golden giant lies like a fallen statue. The front of his helmet and head have been bitten off. There's blood on the steps, and lumps of rubble. Demeny slows, and crouches beside the fallen Sentinel, amazed. Thane pushes on.

He reaches the top. Viridium Plaza.

It's one of the great concourses inside the north-east turn of the Sanctum wall, a place of parades and state ceremonies flanked by the Lepidus Mansions and the golden precincts of the Geograph's Commission and the Tower of the Occullum Survey.

He stops in his tracks. The thunder is here, the deluge, the out-spilling hell. Whatever warning he hoped he could carry, it's far too late. All the devils are here already.

Waves of screaming, chanting Word Bearers, their sickening banners flourished, are swarming out of the burning gates of Lectis and Merkarsis, splintering through the hasty picket lines of Excertus drawn up across the plaza. There's rubble everywhere, rubble and blood and charred hunks of human meat. The sky is a rushing, mottled canopy of smoke. Every tower and structure in sight seems to be burning or raddled with holes. Solar Auxilia support teams rake cannon fire from the high balustrades of the Commission, and six assault squads of Shattered Legion Astartes drive in on the western side. But nothing, nothing, *none* of it, even begins to slow down the engulfing horde of Word Bearers.

He's too late. Everything is too late.

'Demeny!' Thane yells, but the prentice-brother is already beside him at the head of the steps, Berendol's blade in his hands.

'With me,' says Thane, hammer rising.

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6:l

Fragments

And doom falls, like a mailed fist, like the heel of a cruel boot, grinding the last hopes of man to dust. There is no restraint exhibited, no belated mercy. As the traitor-enemy finally grapples with its wounded prey, its brutality does not diminish. It swells, inflamed with callous frustration that the prey has held it at bay so long. Now face to face, hand to hand, it becomes frenzied. Blows rain, un-pulled, upon the face of Empire, a face that can no longer turn aside or hide or retreat. It is payback, it is vindictive gratification, it is punishment for months of resistance and defiance, for lives lost in the effort, for blood spilt in the toil, for every slight and insult and act of contumacy. The final fortress, pinned, compromised and helpless, will be beaten to a pulp by homicidal rage. The end of the siege will not be a victory; it will be a sack. The Imperium of Man, even the concept of the Imperium of Man, will be razed and exterminated.

Fire breeds and multiplies: everywhere, the dusty light is turmeric yellow under an inflamed lava sky.

In the sections where the voids have failed, the Delphic Wall begins to

fracture. The breaches are few at first, but the fact that there are any at all is a sign that hope has gone. The curtain walls of the final fortress, a kilometre and a half high and a kilometre thick, splinter at Canticle Tower, West Palatine, West Delphine and South Sentinel. Fire mushrooms upwards, through sheeting rain and the dissipating lightning of splitting voids. Rubble heaps like avalanche spills, and the screaming divisions of Vorus Ikari, Ekron Fal and Serob Kargul ascend the landslide slopes of cracked grey stone in swarms.

Their praetors lead, banners at their backs, and their war cry is, ‘Dark King! Dark King!’ bellowed from inhuman lungs. The Neverborn flood like oil and smoke around the heels of the ponderous, relentless death engines that lumber after. At each break point, every minute costs both sides a thousand lives.

But the break points in the proud walls are nothing, just the outward signs of the inner calamity. The enemy is already deep inside the Sanctum, carried there in droves by mazing pathways that defy walls and barriers, by immaterial deceit, by invasive boreholes against which there is no physical defence. Materia has given way, and traitor units are emerging in a hundred locations within the Inner Palace, commencing their slaughter the moment they have reconciled – or decided to ignore – the impossibility of their arrival.

Battles erupt along mass passageways. Processionals become killing fields. The proud hallways and auramite chambers of the Terran Palace are scarred by flame and smoke, by blood and bolter round. Towers are engulfed, spires shatter, bridge-spans and skyways collapse under the weight of fighting bodies. Death has come, without logic, sense or permission, and the gilded wonder of the final fortress becomes a zone mortalis.

In the Tanquen Processional, Lucoryphus, Night Lord, so proud of his status and the murders in his wake, stops short, and bitterly realises he is not the first after all. Not the first to find his way inside, not by some measure. The miracle that was worked on him has been worked on others, many others. He sees the brigades of Death Guard mobbing the South Chancel, the Sons of Horus armour units grinding across the Sadrian Concourse. He sees doors and portals in walls where no doors or portals

ever were before, foul tears and wounds in the fabric of reality from which his brethren spill, invasion points beyond the farthest schemes and imaginings of the Lord of Iron. How dull and prosaic seem Perturabo's plans of attack and siegecraft now! How lamentably conventional the defences of Dorn! The warp has conquered and violated all, rotting the False Emperor's Palace and riddling its shredded flesh.

Lucoryphus sets aside his disappointment. Victory is here, conquest, the last and greatest of its kind, and he is part of it.

He readies his gleaming blades, for there is killing to be done.

On the Traxia Skyway, three hundred metres up, Sentinel Xohas Tjan leads a cohort of gleaming Custodes in an effort to dam the torrent of Death Guard and Word Bearers attempting to pour across from the Spire of the Echelons to gain access to the Tower of the Aegis. Even with four companies of terrified Excertus in support, Tjan's force is outnumbered twenty to one. The skyway, a golden span forty metres wide, shivers as the two sides clash. Tjan utters no orders: neurosynergetics convey his needs to his brethren, and his example shows the Excertus all they need to know. He does not falter. He does not fail. None of them do. But the Traxia Skyway does. Integrity lost to damage and shock, the span disintegrates, carrying loyalist and traitor to their deaths together.

At Marnix Confluence, less than two kilometres from the Throne Room, Amit Flesh-Tearer leads the fight.

Vexillary Tamos Roch is dead. The denial companies are cut to the bone, and assailed from all sides. The Confluence is a junction, and the enemy host is pouring in from every passageway and processional. The great seals of the Sanctum have been broken. Armoured death is flooding down the arterial routes like venom in a bloodstream.

The concourse is piled with dead. Hundreds of them are citizens and courtiers cut to ribbons when the traitors began to arrive. The enemy made no distinction between armed combatants and civilians. They surged in, berserk, killing anyone and everyone they found. Amit wonders how many of the fleeing civilians who flooded the concourse have managed to escape, or where they have escaped to. What's left of the denial companies has been driven back onto the steps of the Proserpine Watchtower. The approach

steps, which fan out from the tower's gateway like the rays of a stylised sun, are wide, marble, majestic, and a hundred deep. They are littered with corpses: Sons of Horus killed on their way up, Blood Angels fallen from the summit.

Stone walls and redoubts are atomised by bolter fire, and flamer-wash bathes the watchtower walls. Heavy las-fire and plasma beams rake down from the tower's high gun-slots, and scour the advancing tide of traitor troops. Rotary cannons chime and purr, draining the autoloader chutes. On the open staircase, the fighting is hand-to-hand, furious, individual, a frenzy in the stinging smoke. Loyalist and traitor alike are drowning in a cauldron of boiling noise.

Sword in hand, Amit stands his ground alongside brother Blood Angels, White Scars and Imperial Fists. Each marble step is a battlefield. They send ravening Sons of Horus clattering back down the staircase, piling in heaps. Streams of blood run down the steps.

Amit cleaves a Lupercalian helm, then wrests his dripping blade free to slash it across the throat and chest of another child of treason. As the body topples away from him, he scythes again, and sends a grasping hand and a helmeted head flying into the air.

Enemy rockets and munitions splash against the tower walls at Amit's back, drizzling him and his companions with metal debris. They fight on, faces to the foe, oblivious to everything except the hyper-reactive demands of Astartesian combat. It is almost a trance state, a simple binary equation of kill or die.

Lamirus, fighting at Amit's left hand, falls, torn apart. He is not an indirect victim of the explosions at their heels, nor has he been killed by the Sons of Horus surging up at them.

Amit looks up. He sees that an entirely new entrance to the great Confluence has opened up, like a wet wound in meat.

From the buckling air above him, the Neverborn spill down.

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6:li

Undone

The downpour increases in fury. Oll Persson wipes rain from his face. They're too exposed out on the top of the city wall. A fog is rising, as though it intends to blind them and hide all traces of the thread-clues they are following. Already, the distant walls and the roofs below are becoming invisible in the grey-green haze.

He glances back again, urging his long companions on.

'What is it?' asks Leetu.

It's nothing. Just Oll's imagination, jumping at the shadows behind him just like he has done every step of the way from Calth.

But it's not nothing. There's a figure on the old wall's broad battlement behind them, striding closer, a figure that has walked out of the fog, or nowhere, or both.

It's found him at last.

'Oh god,' says Oll.

Erebus does not speak. He does not break his stride. He doesn't even ask for his blade back. Everything he has to say is inked upon his grizzled flesh or etched upon his tarnished plate.

The Dark Apostle, Hand of Destiny, descends upon them, and begins to kill them.

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6:lii

Destiny foretold

The blackness seems alive. It has a solidity that presses on them. In its depths, Sanguinius hears his brother sigh behind him.

‘I can go no further,’ Ferrus says. His lips have not moved in a long while now.

Sanguinius nods. Ferrus places a huge, armoured hand on his shoulder again. The hand shakes. Whatever Ferrus Manus is containing within himself by force of will, be it pain or anger, is close to bursting free and escaping.

‘I want to, but–’

‘I understand,’ says Sanguinius.

‘If I had a choice–’

‘I understand.’

He can barely see him in the darkness. It is as though Ferrus Manus is not really there, or is rapidly ceasing to be there.

‘Go,’ says Sanguinius. ‘I need no more lessons.’

‘No, one more,’ says Ferrus. ‘He hid in the past.’

‘Horus?’

Ferrus Manus nods. ‘That’s how he tricked you. That’s how he tricked our father. He could not risk our father learning the extent of his power, or reading his thoughts, or comprehending the nature of the trap he had set, so, by will and warp, Horus put himself into his own past, into his memories, so deeply and so completely that, for a time, even he did not know where he was or what he was doing.’

‘Is that possible?’ asks Sanguinius.

‘For him, yes. A tactical masterstroke, but then he *is* the Warmaster. There was no mind for our father to read, no present thoughts that could be betrayed. Horus gave himself to madness and fitful recollection so that he could give nothing of his plan away. And his plan was known only to him, of course.’

‘And thus we were deceived, and came here,’ murmurs Sanguinius.

‘Yes,’ says Ferrus sadly. ‘And the need for such insane cunning is now passed. You are here. So his mind is restoring, rapidly. He is becoming himself again, quickly, himself and more besides, fully willed and cogent, present and all-powerful in this moment. I tell you this, brother, because it takes huge effort, even for one such as him, to reconstruct a mind so thoroughly dismantled. He is not quite there yet.’

‘So he is weak?’

‘In body? No. But in thought, perhaps still, a little. Traces of the self-inflicted dementia may persist. At the very least, he may be confused or not self-assured.’

‘So, a flaw I can exploit?’

‘Perhaps, while it lasts. Which won’t be long. And even weak, he is–’

‘I understand.’

‘I know you do.’

Sanguinius looks at the way ahead, at darkness folded into darkness. Deep in it, shrouded, but close enough for Sanguinius to taste, there is a baleful presence. A dull red glow, an eye, perhaps, unblinking, or just a throbbing manifestation of hatred and malice, like a radioactive ingot hidden at the bottom of an oceanic abyss, or a guttering sun at the very limit of the void.

Or, perhaps, merely, a destiny foretold.

He hears the hot-fat spit and crackle of the warp.

‘He’s here,’ he says.

‘He always was,’ says Ferrus.

Sanguinius lifts his sword, making ready. Light flares and drips from the blade, golden in defiance of the darkness. It barely illuminates them. The owned night swallows its glow.

‘The bastard has my skull,’ Ferrus says. ‘Fetch it back. I don’t much like being a trophy.’

Sanguinius nods.

‘Until we meet again,’ says Ferrus Manus.

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PART SEVEN

HEROES IN THE LABYRINTH, MONSTERS IN THE MAZE

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7:i

The fate of the long companions

There is always a monster, and it will always catch you.

Oll has led them and protected them across thousands of light years and tens of thousands of years, but the voyage ends here, on the rain-lashed battlement walk of a crumbling stone wall that encircles an abandoned city.

Erebus comes out of the rain. He is part of the rain. He is part of the storm. He is the elemental wrath engulfing the old city wall.

Oll stands his ground, drenched to the skin, his sodden clothes flapping in the wind. The others are screaming at him to run, but he knows there's no point. You can't run from destiny. That's the thing about labyrinths: there's always something in there with you. Oll knows that. He's got the scars to prove it. When he entered this particular labyrinth on Calth, he hoped, with the same foolish hope of any questing hero, that he could follow the thread all the way to the centre before the monster found him.

But in a place where time and distance are undone, there's no chance of that. The monster that's been trailing him through every twist and turn has caught up with them. And like any and every questing hero before him, Oll recognises his foolish hope was forlorn.

Worse, he is no Iason, no Sigfrid, no Gilgamez, no Bearwulf, no Olyteus, no Parzival. He is no virile broad-back with a sturdy spear and a bronze war-shield. Not any more. He is an old man, soaked to the bone, fumbling in his wet coat for a stone knife that wasn't meant for this kind of fight.

Erebus is a hell-thing, a towering beast in full war plate, half-made of rain and rage. The rest of him is words, foul words, infernal words, knotted and strung together into a humanoid shape. He opens his mouth to speak. Oll finds the knife–

But Leetu is there. The fastest-moving of them all, the only one with a chance of matching the Word Bearer strength-for-strength. The iron post in his hands is wrenched back to swing.

Erebus speaks.

The word of power, a cluster of unholy phonemes dredged from the warp and weaponised, is meant for Oll, but Leetu is in the way. The Astartes is hurled backwards by the impact, knocking John flat, the post spinning from his hand. He hits the crumbling copestones of the wall, and doesn't get up.

Erebus is already intent on Oll again. He has other things to say, and most of them are lethal. Oll lunges at him with the knife.

'No,' says Erebus. Just that. *No*.

Oll realises he can't move. His hand is extended, shaking, clenching the knife, but he's frozen, his body obeying the other's demand. Erebus smiles, and reaches through the rain towards Oll's throat.

Krank hits Erebus. Roaring defiance, roaring Oll's name, demonstrating more selfless loyalty than any gene-son of the Emperor, Krank swings his makeshift cudgel into the monster's face and chest with both hands and every ounce of strength he can muster.

Rainwater sprays from the impact. The ceramite cudgel shatters. So do both of Krank's wrists. Krank staggers aside, stunned, gasping in shock. Erebus tuts, and utters another word that strikes Krank in the back of the head, and blows his skull apart with the force of a point-blank shotgun. Oll wants to howl as the headless corpse falls, but he's still frozen, his denied muscles screaming, lactic acid burning in his limbs as he tries to overcome the grip.

The grip becomes physical. The Word Bearer's huge paw closes around his neck.

Erebus lifts him up. Choking, Oll's vision begins to tunnel. The drum of

his pulse is in his ears. He sees Erebus' face. The smile of triumph. The dead eyes. The tattoos of demented words. The flecks of Dogent Krank's blood on the cheek, the nose, the brow, beginning to wash off in the rain. Oll knows his own face is spattered with Krank's blood too. Blackness yawns as his air runs out, and the grip on him grinds his bones–

The blows that free him are heavy, like a jackhammer. Oll lands on his back on the wet stone of the wall-top walkway. Graft, servos extended, is repeatedly and relentlessly striking Erebus with the negation box. The assault is unstinting, mechanical, like a steam-press. Graft, not built for war, is addressing the problem with the tireless functionality of an agricultural servitor, as though simply pile-driving home a fence-post. There is no hesitation. The servitor just slams the duralloy box into Erebus with its primary manipulators, blow upon blow, without pause or consideration. Unlike Krank's ferocious effort, this attack has more than mortal strength behind it. Graft is a bulk-grade unit. Oll's seen it lift a tonne of harvested produce in one go.

The monster steps back. He raises his arms to ward off the incessant rain of blows. The duralloy crate is buckling and coming apart with each impact. Not all of the blood on Erebus' face belongs to Dogent Krank.

'Graft! Get away!' Oll yells.

'I am performing good works, Trooper Persson,' Graft replies, striking with unrelenting industrial application. 'Run clear.'

Oll feels hands on him. It's John, trying to get him up and drag him back. John's yelling something, but Oll can't make sense of the words. He's too dizzy, limp, his ears ringing.

'The knife…' Oll gasps.

He dropped it when Erebus dropped him. Oll pushes John away, falls to one knee, and sees the knife a few metres away, lying on the wet stone right at the lip of the wall.

Zybes appears, grabbing the knife, saving it before it can be kicked off the edge and lost.

The negation crate is no more than tatters, entirely destroyed by the repeated blows. Graft starts striking with its manipulators instead. Erebus grabs one primary limb to block it, then another. Secondary limbs catch him in the face, the gorget. The monster is irritated now. Blood-flecked and irritated. He twists his inhuman grip and tears off one of Graft's primary

arms. He tosses it into the pelting rain. With one hand still locking the other primary limb at bay, the monster reaches in and grabs a secondary. He shreds that off in a spray of sparks, leaving a stump of shorn cables. He opens his mouth to speak directly into Graft's face.

A stone clips his temple. It's no more than a bee-sting, but Erebus snatches his head around angrily. Katt winds up for a second cast, her makeshift sling whirling.

She looses. A barked syllable from Erebus stops the speeding stone in the air, holds it, suspended and shivering in the rain, just for a second, then crushes it into dust. Erebus, no longer entertained, picks Graft up and hurls it.

The heavy, damaged servitor soars down the length of the wall-top towards Katt and Actae. Katt flinches. Actae raises her hand. A twitch. Graft stops, upside down, flight arrested, halfway between the Word Bearer and the witch. Actae holds the servitor in mid-air with her psykana as easily as Erebus held Katt's stone. Oll can see Graft's cracked plating, the oil and hydraulics spurting from ruptured pipes, the odd angle of Graft's upturned head now that one of its neck struts has snapped.

Erebus gazes at the blind witch fifty metres away. He regards the stricken servitor suspended in the rain between them. He gives a slight nod, as though to acknowledge this feat.

Then he speaks another ugly word of power.

Graft disassembles explosively. The shockwave hurls mangled metal debris in all directions. Erebus raises a hand gently, as if bestowing a benediction, and the debris spinning towards him, some of it large enough to injure or kill, ripples away from him.

The rest of them are not so well protected.

Actae recoils, and hurls up a wall of force that shields her from the worst, but not fast enough. A spinning gear-wheel clips Katt's head, and drops her on her back. A splintered, saw-edged section of Graft's shoulder plate hits John full in the face, and smashes him into Oll. Hard shrapnel pieces of the loyal servitor chip the stone of the wall-top and walkway. Spars of metal bursting from Graft's chassis frame strike the black stone, and embed like arrows. The rod section of a primary limb impales Hebet Zybes through the chest.

He looks surprised, confused. He looks down at the bar of metal

protruding from his sternum. The clew of red thread drops from his hand, rolls across the walkway playing a trail of twine behind it, and then drops off the edge. Then Zybes topples backwards off the wall without a sound, the knife in his other hand.

Oll sees him fall, his body plummeting into the long, dark drop below. There's nothing he can do. He's already flat on his chest, his arms hanging over the edge of the wall. When John was struck, he fell back into Oll, knocking him down, and then kept going. By some miracle, Oll managed to roll as he went over, and grabbed John's arms. Oll has him by the wrist. He's flat on his front, head and shoulders over the edge, his weakening grip the only thing preventing John from plunging. The grip is slick with rain. John's feet flail and kick, trying to find a toe-hold. Oll's arms shudder with the strain. He can feel John's wrist dislocating. He can feel himself slowly slithering over the edge, dragged by his friend's weight. John looks up at him, framed by the sheer drop below. His face is a mess of blood, his cheek and nose torn, his mouth and chin lacerated by the shrapnel, his jaw shattered.

His eyes are begging.

For what? To be saved? For Oll to let him go and save himself?

'Hold on to me!' Oll groans. John thrashes with his other hand, but he can't quite grab Oll's sleeve, and the motion makes him swing more violently, threatening to break Oll's grip entirely.

John says something. Nothing comes out of his ruined mouth except noise and blood. He tries again. What is he saying?

Is it *let me go*? Is he pleading for Oll to let him drop?

No, it's something else. It's–

Erebus is standing over them, standing at the edge of the wall astride Oll, gazing down at them.

'Curious,' Erebus murmurs. He bends down, raindrops running off the edges of his plate, grabs Oll, and lifts, raising John too until he is able to grab him as well. He hauls them both up, one in each hand, and dangles them either side of him like prize catches.

He steps back from the edge. He tosses Oll to the walkway. He holds Grammaticus close, eye-to-eye.

'What were you trying to say?' Erebus asks. 'What word were you trying to speak with that broken mouth of yours? Tell me. Teach it to me.'

John snorts and, as effectively as he can with a mangled mouth, spits blood into Erebus' face. Erebus grimaces, turns his head away and, still holding John aloft, delicately reaches to wipe the insult off his cheek.

And that's when John Grammaticus stabs him in the ear with the aeldari shears.

Erebus roars and stumbles backwards, fumbling to wrench the xenos instrument out of his head. John, forgotten, hits the ground and folds up, gasping. Oll gets to him, tries to haul him up. John's head lolls back. Then Leetu is beside them, back on his feet, lifting them both, dragging them clear. Erebus is turning towards them. He has tugged the shears out. He's about to speak again, a word of power to vaporise all three of them.

His mouth refuses to open.

A perplexed expression crosses the monster's tattooed face. Rain streams down his cheeks and whips off his chin as he tries to shake his head and make his mouth work. He growls, but his lips refuse to part. He wheels in silent rage. Actae is advancing towards him along the top of the wall, Katt sprawled unconscious or dead behind her. Her hands are raised, fingers curled like hooks. She is silencing the Word Bearer by force of will alone.

+The knife. Get the damn knife.+

Oll hears Actae's command in the base of his skull. He feels Leetu wince as he hears it too.

+Get the knife, Persson. Retrieve it. It's the only thing that matters.+

'For god's sake–' Oll stammers.

+I can hold him.+

Leetu drags Oll backwards. They're half-carrying John between them. The nearest wall-steps are about forty metres behind them. Erebus sees them begin to run. He glances back at Actae, and advances on her instead.

He's unclamped his power maul.

She stands her ground. She straightens her arms as though she's trying to push a tree over, the heels of her palms pressed together, the fingers curled outwards. The psykanic force pulsing out of her is now so strong that the pelting downpour around her and her adversary begins to blow sideways, spraying up and away. Stonework cracks beneath her braced feet. Erebus walks into her invisible assault, easily at first, then finding increasing resistance, like a man walking head down into a hurricane. But still he keeps going, relentless, wordless, maul in hand, one straining step after

another.

The top of the wall-steps is twenty metres away. Oll can see the long flight of stone steps running down into the darkness below him, flush-cut to the wall. Too far to jump.

He can feel the psykanic discharge behind him. He glances back. He sees Actae and Erebus, face to face, no more than ten metres apart. She is holding her place, juddering with effort. Rain eddies around her in unnatural spirals. Strings of warp-lightning sizzle in the air. The monster is still advancing on her. One step. Another. Each pace a superhuman effort of strength and will. He is slowly, slowly, closing the distance.

He'll kill her when he reaches her. What does she have left? What reserve of power? Is there anything more she can draw on and unleash to stop him?

As though she has heard Oll's thoughts, her voice reaches him.

+Get off the wall. Get out of the way. Now!+

Oll hesitates. He looks back, wide-eyed. Leetu grabs him, circling an arm around Oll's waist. The Astartes has thrown John's limp form over his other shoulder. He has also heard Actae's command.

Oll starts to speak. Leetu is already acting.

Carrying both of them, he leaps off the wall.

They fall forever, but it's not forever. It's perhaps twelve metres. Leetu lands, square and true, feet first, on the descending flight of steps below the wall. The black stone crazes under the impact. Leetu sways alarmingly, but keeps his balance. Oll thumps against his plate as they land, his ribs almost cracking.

He looks up, frantic, as Leetu sets him down. Through the sheeting rain, he can still see them, two figures on the top of the wall above him. Actae has not budged. Not a single step back. Erebus is almost on her. One more stride and she'll be in striking range of his maul.

But John, Leetu and Oll are no longer in her line of fire.

And everyone else is dead.

Actae sighs. She recomposes her power, refocusing her will from a wide shield of resistance into a single, piercing lance of raw psykanic rage.

Released, Erebus rushes her, maul raised, but the alteration takes no longer than it takes a synapse to fire.

A four-hundred-metre stretch of the ancient wall-top turns into a blister of consuming blue energy. The force of the blast ripples along the wall in both

directions, splintering stone, exploding battlements, and hurling the walkway pavers into the air. Leetu tries to shield John and Oll with his plated body as stone slabs and blocks the size of munition boxes start to rain down.

The shockwave hits. There is a deafening thunder of tumbling masonry.

The city wall is thick and high and very old. When the light fades, almost fifty metres of it have entirely collapsed, crushing the ancient dwellings and structures below, and a vast sheet of black dust is rising into the rain above the Inevitable City.

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7:ii

The now and the here

There’s nothing left.

There’s no road to follow any more. Keeler realises this belatedly.

At some point, while they have been walking, the great Via Aquila has faded away, its course and features gradually dissolving into a barren, rusty waste. Keeler sees a few cracked paving stones, embedded unevenly in the red dirt, and the occasional post or waymarker, the only trace evidence of an immense Imperial highway that has somehow petered out without any of them noticing.

There is no city any more, either, no ruins, no rubble, no half-standing buildings. Just a vast wasteland of dry, copper soil with blocky outcrops of rock and square-shouldered mesas. Dust swirls and drives in the arid wind, and the sky is a pyrocumulus ocean.

Is this the Palace still? *Was* this the city? Has war scoured this zone so fiercely that everything, even debris and remains, has been reduced to dry dust and baked earth? It reminds Keeler of picts she’s seen of the surface of Mars. She leaves the head of the slow-moving mass, and clambers up one of the ragged outcrops. From the top, she sees Sigismund’s armoured

vehicles grinding ahead, trailing dust, followed by the foot-slogging units of his Seconds, spread out in small brigades. Behind them comes the pilgrimage. It is a staggering river of human souls, a hundred metres wide, snaking across the wasteland as far as she can see. She sees the trailing loops of it curving down the distant ridge of cliffs to reach the flat waste where she stands. How long ago did she make that staggered descent? An hour? Two? How many more people follow behind those she can just see? How long is the column of survivors? It looks like the greatest mass exodus in human history.

But an exodus needs a place to leave, and a destination, and all sense of place, along with the road, has been erased.

We're the road now, she thinks. Her eyes follow the long, curving river of souls. *We have become our own road, and our own destination.*

She climbs down, and rejoins the column. The dust, blowing like fine flour, is in everything: her eyes, her mouth, the folds of her clothes. It dulls the ominous black of Sigismund's armour. The Champion offered her and Lord Zhi-Meng the respite of riding on the track-skirts of one of his fighting vehicles. Keeler refused, saying she would walk like everyone else, and the choirmaster, though clearly longing to rest his limbs, declined too, tightening his grip on her arm. So the Champion has chosen to walk with them at the head of the civilian mass, while his armed force spreads ahead to test the way. He walks, bare-headed, carrying his sword. There's something penitential about that.

'What did you see?' he asks, nodding towards the outcrop that she had scrambled up.

'Nothing we can't see from here,' she replies.

He doesn't ask her where they're going. It seems he is content to be invested with the deed or act itself. To him, she believes, the small actions and individual things count. Unlike his father, he doesn't need to know an end plan or an ultimate goal, just the now and the here, tackling life one step, or one blow, at a time. There's infinite peace in that attitude. He is the most disciplined man she has ever met, entirely focused on duty, yet that focus seems to render him so free he seems weightless.

Beyond the next ridge of rock, they come upon a great bowl of dust, like a dried seabed. The carcasses of dead war engines are scattered here, huge atolls of tangled metal. They are so burned and abraded, it's impossible to

discern insignia. The pilgrimage advances between the wrecks and the dead giants, sometimes passing through the shadow of a huge foot or burned-out torso. Loose armour plates bang in the dry wind. Dead cables swing like vines. Keeler can see the sky between exposed rib-stanchions, or through holes in armour-skin punched by unimaginable weapons. Surface coatings are flaked and peeling, and the cracked earth between the huge machine-corpses is littered with metallic debris.

This was the site of an engine-war, and from the number of wrecks, an engine-war of staggering scale. Perhaps the fury of this titanic clash, the detonating energies that must have felled these giants, explains the erasure of the Palace in this area, and even the immensity of the dried bowl they have descended into and begun to cross. Is it a crater? Was the conflagration here so colossal that it dented the planet and burned the Palace structure down to the bedrock?

Why do these dead engines look like they have been decaying for years?

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7:iii

Contaminated

Everything they find is dead, everything lost. They cut open the next blast hatch, and haul it aside. Harsh blue light shines out at them. The Sons of Horus hesitate.

Abaddon does not.

‘Ezekyle!’ Baraxa calls out, but Abaddon steps through.

A service way, broad and lofty, stretches ahead of him, one side lined with heavy, through-deck ductwork. The intense blue glare is coming from recessed emitters in the ceiling. The light is surgically raw, a burning ultraviolet. Abaddon can hear a fierce, high-pitched hum at the edge of the audible threshold.

‘For pity’s sake,’ Baraxa calls to him. ‘Come back. It’s decontam.’

It is. Abaddon knows full well. The *Vengeful Spirit*’s decontamination and containment systems have activated in this section in response to a hazardous agent. The sterilising light-burn, along with ultrasonic and anti-viral processors, are bathing the area with an antimicrobial aura to eliminate biohazards, radiation or xenos pollutants detected by the environmental sensoria.

‘Ezekyle, there’s something in there–’

‘I know,’ Abaddon replies.

He’s looking at it. Cautiously, Baraxa joins him. They stare at the structure for a few moments. Baraxa utters a quiet profanity.

Decontam protocols cut in automatically when a foreign body is detected. It could be spores, bacteria, viral phages, an atmospheric fault, anything the ship’s sensoria don’t like.

In this case, the foreign body is an old shop. It is framed of age-black timber, and the daubed plaster is stained and decaying. From the look of the faded images painted on the plaster, or carved into the woodwork, it had been the emporium of an astrologer or diviner of asterisms. Abaddon sees crude constellations marked out, and zodiacal symbols. Saturn, Mercury, the Goat-fish, the Sagittary. The windowpanes are thick and dirty. Sickly weeds grow from the doorstep and broken eaves. The building is bulging out of the wall like a cancerous growth. It’s impossible to say where the old wood and plaster ends and the ship’s metalwork begins. The materia of both is fused together.

‘I don’t–’ Baraxa begins, but he does. He must, Abaddon thinks. They can both see what’s happening. There’s been evidence of it all along: the torn pages, the old books, the out-of-place objects, even the manner of their arrival.

This is his father’s work. His father’s crime. His father’s madness. The warp has been allowed to stir loose, blending and mixing place and time, folding the ship into a thousand other spaces. Reality is diseased. Matter is unstable.

There’s no control. It’s gone too far.

Abaddon steps closer to the old storefront and examines the way it is sprouting from the wall. It’s not a growth or an intrusion. It’s simply there, occupying this space. Why this? Why this old building? Is it significant? What is it part of, what town, what city, on what world?

When?

Is there, somewhere, an old city into which a section of the *Vengeful Spirit*’s forward service way now distends?

The blue light and ultrasonic buzz are unpleasant, gnawing at his senses. It’s pathetic. The ship is fighting so hard to cleanse itself, but it’s futile. No emergency air-scrub or light purge will dislodge this.

‘He’s lost control,’ Abaddon murmurs.

‘Truly?’ Baraxa asks.

Abaddon nods. ‘All along,’ he mutters. ‘All along, I’ve warned–’

‘I know.’

‘Counselled him. Said it was too much.’

‘I know.’

‘This was never the way, Azelas,’ says Abaddon. ‘This was never a way to win. And this was never a weapon. Not one we could use. It was only ever going to use us.’

‘You have control,’ Baraxa says.

He looks at Abaddon.

‘Don’t you?’ he asks.

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7:iv

The sorcerer

‘You are afraid,’ Ahriman tells them.

It’s not an observation. It’s an instruction. Three words cast to instruct their states of being and command their minds.

They are afraid anyway. The archivist is backing away from him, struck dumb, her retreat only halted by a shelf of books. Sindermann and Mauer stare in helpless horror at his looming figure.

At his instruction, their breathless fright becomes absolute terror. The archivist collapses, knocking books from the shelves, paralysed with dread. Mauer covers her face and sinks to her knees, shaking. Sindermann freezes, eyes wide, unable to breathe. Fear transfixes him like a rusty spike.

‘P-please–’ he gasps, choking on his own tongue.

Ahriman turns to regard him, curious.

The warrior of the Thousand Sons is tall, distressingly so, as though perspective in the collection chamber has shifted. He seems like a structure made of twilight, just panels and planes of dusk expertly fitted together to form an impression of robes, of armour plate, of tall, curved, impossible horns. Every part of him is gloom and murk, but that shape is suffused by

rumours of colour: lapis and Prussian blue, cochineal and carmine, bismuth and cinnabar, mixed into the darkness like pigment, so that each piece of his shadow has a different quality and texture.

‘I know your face,’ he says. ‘You are the great iterator, Kyril Sindermann.’

Sindermann’s mouth moves, but no sound comes out. His old heart is about to burst.

‘Your work,’ says Ahriman, ‘your purpose, I hold in high regard.’

He pauses, and seems to consider something.

‘You are *not* afraid,’ he decides.

The terror releases them. Mauer topples over onto her hands, panting. Sindermann sways, dizzy, gasping for air. Fear still clings to them, cold sharp, but it’s their own now, not the terror the sorcerer bestowed.

Ahriman takes Sindermann by the arm and steers him to sit in one of the library chairs. His touch is as gentle as a blunt bear trap.

‘I have always endorsed your efforts to document Imperial history, Kyril Sindermann,’ Ahriman says. ‘Even in the early days of the crusade, I was vocal in my support of the Order of Remembrancers.’

‘You w-were,’ Sindermann manages.

‘There is no greater duty than to know ourselves and our universe,’ says Ahriman. ‘But memories lapse. That gathered knowledge must be recorded, precisely and in great detail, by serious men. It is not enough, Kyril Sindermann, to read the future, as I do. We need to be able to read the past too, for without it, the future often makes no sense.’

‘Are you g-going to kill us?’ Mauer asks, cowering on her hands and knees.

‘Do I need to?’ Ahriman replies. ‘Do you wish me to? I wouldn’t blame you. I could make it painless and quick. The slaughter will reach here soon, and there is no escape. I could grant you mercy, if you desire it. But I have no interest in you at all, to be honest, though encountering the great Kyril Sindermann is an unexpected pleasure. No, I am here on my own business. I leave the mindless killing to the sons of Lupercal and Angron.’

The towering, horned shadow turns and surveys the bookstacks around them for a moment. Then it glances back at them.

‘You do understand you’ve lost?’ Ahriman asks them. ‘Your cause is done. Terra has fallen and the Palace is falling. Your Emperor has been vanquished, and Horus, my nominal Warmaster, has triumphed. All that

remains is ransack and destruction. Nothing will survive.’

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7:v

Immortal Fo

It’s approaching now. Very fast.

Amon Tauromachian holds his position at the head of the Pons Aegeus sky bridge. He is as motionless as the Retreat towering behind him.

He stares at the Sanctum city across the bridge, the wide and magnificent vista of palatial facades, steepling spires and grand towers. He can feel the tremble of the deck, the distant thump and reverberation. In the distance, gouts of flame billow and scud above the rooftops. Lights flash and strobe behind the immediate skyline. There’s ash in the wind. Several zones of the Sanctum, zones less than five kilometres to the south of where he stands and well inside the walls of the final fortress, are ablaze. An inferno sucks and roars, lighting the horizon, matting the sky with a low, black blanket of pouring smoke. He can hear gunfire, muffled and sporadic. He can hear the warning horns bleating intermittently, as though they are out of breath. He can hear thumps, the sundering of walls, the shattering of glass, voices shouting and, here and there, snatches of inhuman chanting that curl and lick at the air.

Almost every fibre of him is urging him to leave his post and stride into

the city. To take his place. To join the fight. His whole life has been dedicated to the defence of the citadel. It's a duty he trained for, practised for, year after year, the gruelling efforts of test and preparation. It's why he was made. To neglect his fundamental purpose now seems like dereliction.

But he has his orders. And that part, that one part, keeps him in place, nullifying every other urge and desire. He contains his will. He has been instructed. His fingers flex and fidget around the haft of his spear. He has his orders. He must see them through to completion.

Once they're done, he can give in to his need. He can go to war… *run* to war… and protect the citadel he was created to love.

This… this waiting… is perhaps the greatest test of his life. The most demanding blood game of endurance and perseverance. He will see it through. He is Legio Custodes.

He's aware of her long before she steps into view beside him. He doesn't look around.

'He's still working,' Andromeda-17 says.

'Progress?'

'It seems so.'

'Expectation?'

'I can't speak to a timeframe, but if he's successful, he and the weapon must be removed to a place of safekeeping.'

She pauses. She laughs, bitterly, at what she has just said.

'Is there such a place?' she asks.

'Conceivably, Fo and the weapon could be transported off-world and secured. There are protocols of emergency evacuation that remain unused.'

'Well,' she says, 'that's what will have to happen.'

'Or,' says Amon, 'if he is successful, the weapon must be deployed.'

'Well,' she says. 'Not my call. Not yours either, I imagine. That would require the authority of… Lord Vulkan? Or the master of the Chosen? Someone.'

'That presumes,' says Amon, 'that Lord Vulkan or Master Hassan are still alive.'

'You think–'

He raises his left arm and points. A simple, almost mechanical gesture.

'Those flames. They are issuing from structures less than two kilometres from the Throne Room.'

‘Are we done, then?’ she asks.

He doesn’t reply.

‘I mean, Custodian, if they’re all dead. If… Well, does the decision fall to us?’

Amon doesn’t answer that either. Another slow, deep boom rumbles across the sky. The wind tugs at her robes.

‘If he fails, Custodian,’ she asks, ‘what then? According to your orders, I mean?’

‘He will be returned to custody, if that is still practicable,’ Amon replies, ‘pending future evaluation, if that also proves practicable.’

‘And if he attempts deception?’

‘He is an enemy of the Throne,’ says Amon. ‘In the circumstances, I would execute him just like any other traitor.’

He turns his head and looks down at her.

‘Keep careful watch on him. Report any irregularities.’

‘You could watch him yourself,’ she replies.

‘It is reasonable to assume that, before too much longer, I will be required here, simply to ensure the security of the Retreat. The enemy is closing rapidly.’

Amon unclips a small neurosynergetic alarm from his hip and hands it to her. She takes it.

‘Then I’ll be your eyes,’ she says, and walks back into the tower.

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7:vi

Drawing the last weapons

He does not want to watch them die. But he looks anyway, when all others turn away, out of respect for their sacrifice.

The death toll in the Throne Room is increasing rapidly. How many now? Three hundred? Four? He's lost count.

I did this, thinks Vulkan. *I ordered this.*

'My lord.'

This blood is on my hands. This industrial slaughter–

'My Lord of Drakes.' It's Abidemi.

Vulkan turns slowly to acknowledge the Draaksward. Abidemi is looking at him, not at the unfolding horror. His left hand is raised to shield his eyes from the glare, despite the protection of his helm.

'A safer distance, perhaps, my Lord of Drakes,' Abidemi suggests reluctantly.

Everyone has withdrawn from the vicinity of the Throne. Everyone that can. The apprenti of the Adnector Concillium have been obliged to move themselves and their devices a greater distance from the dais. The death rate among them, and the damage rendered to their mechanisms, was becoming

too punishing to manage. They have raised adamantine baffles, portable barriers resembling the defensive plates of field bunkers, to shield themselves from the radiating fury as they toil and fumble with their instruments. Still, some of them drop without warning, and control panels short out and fuse. No serf or servitor can venture close. All personnel and courtiers, and Palace staff who found themselves, through whatever mischance, sheltering in the Throne Room, have pulled back to the edges of the huge chamber. Vulkan can hear them, the weeping huddles and lamenting throngs, cowering around the limits of the vast space. Few dare to look.

Even Proconsul Uzkarel and his ring of silent Custodians set around the Throne have been obliged to increase the diameter of their warding circle. They are now fifty metres further out, and more widely spaced. They remain with their backs to the Throne's steps, lances at their sides, wordless and unmoving. Their golden wargear is entirely blackened with soot, and the red plumes of their proud helms are burned away to ash. Vulkan can see the pale anti-shadows they cast on the Throne Room floor, where their motionless forms partly block the radiance that is otherwise ebonising the polished tiles.

He knows that he has cast a bleached shadow negative of his own. The front of his plate is caked in ash, the metal heating to exhibit secret elemental colours. His cloak smoulders. He, alone, has not stepped back. He, alone, has not turned away.

It is no longer possible to see the Throne. It is sheathed in a white-hot column of fire, a searing bloom that leaps up, swirling and wild, and scorches the majestic ceiling far above. It is blinding. Immense. The regal canopy has long since vaporised. The plinth and the dais, like the seat of a vast bonfire, glows red with infernal heat. The rare and precious alien metals that compose it are beginning to blister and glisten. Moldavite panels, formed in meteoric heat, crack and shatter. Liquid psycurium quivers and trickles like mercury. Burning psychoplastic throws off the charnel stink of cremating bones. The heart of the fire, the Throne and the figure upon it, both lost from sight, is too bright to behold. Loose ejections of empyric flame occasionally burst from the inferno like solar flares and spatter the floor like molten ore.

But it is stabilised. The Concillium seniors report that some measure of

control has been restored, and that the Regent's rapid decline has been arrested, at least temporarily.

The price of that reprieve, however…

According to the directives of the Unspoken Sanction, the instruction of which Vulkan knows he must live with for the remainder of his lives, the psycho-able candidates are still being brought in. Each one of them has been narco-sedated and placed within an anti-gravitic casket. Mind-locked servitors guide the floating caskets in silent rivers from the Silver Door and the Throne Room's other entrance ports. Coffins for the living. There are hundreds of them, and thousands more yet to be steered in. Nulls of the Sisterhood await them at the wall gantries, taking each casket in turn and sliding it into its machined wall socket. Other Sisters are clearing spent caskets so that sockets can be re-primed.

The burnout rate is atrocious. There is a smell of ash in the air, a stink Vulkan can't get out of his throat. The psychic backwash of this monstrous immolation should be unbearable too, but it is virtually absent. Every shred and scrap of psykanic power is being sucked into the conflagration and consumed.

Vulkan observes the process of every death. He owes them that decency. He wishes there was the time and means to record their names. History should remember these sacrifices, every one of them.

But it will not.

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The Golden Throne ablaze.

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7:vii

The brink

‘Knife Edge!’ Adophel yells. The Chapter Master has named all the battle sites, giving each one a simple, colloquial name. *Knife Edge* is a sharp, sheer ridge rising on the eastern edge of the deep pass, precariously connecting to the cliffs beneath the east-flank fighting platforms.

It has been contested three times previously. The Death Guard swarming its hard angle are making their fourth attempt. The battle of the pass has been rolling for hours, in overlapping waves. Is it one, sporadic battle, or dozens strung together?

No one hears the Chapter Master’s warning cry over the roar of warfare at *Slant Rock, Axe-Beard Ledge* and *Gateway Cliff*, but squads of Dark Angels scramble to the east-flank platforms nevertheless. They arrive in time to fend off the Death Guard attempting to claw up the last few metres of sheer rock, firing their bolters down the face of the cliff, and using spears and pole-arms to dislodge those who have reached the lip.

Zahariel, behind his infamous mask, is amplifying the commands, of Adophel, and of Corswain, and of all the commanding warriors. Crouched at *Tilted Rock*, he is surveying the churning battlescape, and relaying

warnings and instructions as they arise, orchestrating the positioning and repositioning of the seneschal's dwindling force. The vox has long since given out, and vocal commands are useless except at close range. Only by his coordinating telepathic bursts is cohesion being maintained.

Their stand has come to depend on stamina and improvisation. There are no longer enough battle-brothers in Corswain's command to cover all the lines of attack at once. Zahariel shifts men as best he can, like pieces on a gaming board, moving them from fighting platform to cliff edge, or ridgeline to bulwark, in time to greet and deny the enemy's next angle of assault. No one questions the adoption of psychic command. It is expediency. It is pragmatism in the face of death. But for the voice in their heads, keeping them one step ahead of each attacking wave, the Dark Angels would have been overrun hours before.

In the same way, no one has objected to Adophel's colourful renaming of the landscape. This began, before the vox went down, as a way of quickly identifying landmarks in the defensive structure. The schematic charts they held of the mountain's topography were mainly composed of serial numbers and elevation markers, strings of digits easily confused amid the mayhem. Adophel's simple, blunt descriptors were quicker and more reliable to convey. Besides, Corswain had to assume that the Death Guard had access to the same tactical schematics. Adophel's naming system, even when yelled man-to-man, was a basic code that masked their strategic decisions from the foe.

So, from *Blind Spur* to *Corpse Slope*, the Dark Angels evolve and maintain their furious repulse.

How long will the mask hold? The Death Guard must be learning, or at least guessing, their crude terminology. And Zahariel's brain is beginning to burn.

At every second, alongside his intense coordination of the defence, Zahariel is monitoring and assisting the efforts of his brothers inside the Hollow Mountain. Asradael, Cartheus and Tanderion have not left their places in the echoing interior. With desperate focus, they work to repair the beacon's systems and redraft the delicate psykanic lore that governs them. Some part of this work is restoration, recomposing the original sequences established by the mountain's astropaths and architects, but other parts are wholly the arcane lore known only to the Mystai. In places where the

psykanic engrams are entirely ruined or destroyed, the Librarians are splicing in etheric mechanisms that no one outside the inner circles of Caliban's secret order has ever seen.

The three of them are exhausted from the gruelling effort. For Zahariel, extending his mind in support of them while simultaneously supervising the ever-shifting field of war, the labour is agony.

The witchery of Typhus bombards him all the while. A voice of voices, it hisses in the *azif* of the swarming flies, streams from the chaogenous winds, stutters from the driving rain, oozes from the mire, grinds from the black rocks of the scarp. The whispers slither across the surface of his mind, trying to find a crack to prise open, trying to find a way in. He tries to blink them away, but they start to mat his eyes like cobwebs, and stick to his lips, and stuff his mouth. He can't breathe–

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7:viii

Death match

The World Eaters come at them from beneath the rotting shadow of a slain Imperator. A warband of thirty or so, utterly feral. It's impossible to tell if they were lying in wait, or if this is simply a chance encounter.

They cross the dust towards the pilgrimage, stampeding like animals, howling like the damned or the demented, one group of lost souls attacking another, both lost for utterly different reasons. Keeler hears snatches of Nagrakali war cries on the wind. She feels Zhi-Meng, clinging to her arm, tremble in fear.

Five hundred metres out, the Seconds begin to engage them. Keeler sees the puff and blink of turret-mounts firing, the wood-on-wood thumps reaching her a second later. She sees the prickle-flash of small-arms as the infantry units open fire. Then the World Eaters' ragged line meets the curve of Sigismund's retinue extending to meet them, and both vanish in a welter of dust as bodies crash together. She hears the unmistakable boom of bolter fire, the clatter of plate, the clang of impacts.

Sigismund is already moving, his sword trailing his shoulder from an outstretched arm. The speed at which he accelerates is astonishing. She will

never be able to reconcile the scale and mass of the Astartes with their ability to move faster than the swiftest human athlete. What must it feel like to be so strong and so fleet, even when encumbered by the bulk of plate?

Not for the first time in her life, she experiences a flash of transhuman dread. And that's just from the sight of Sigismund.

The Seconds have met and held the main mass of traitors, and locked them in a butchering melee, but several of the World Eaters have broken around the edge of the vanguard line and are making directly for the head of the civilian caravan.

Sigismund runs to meet them, head-on. He covers the ground like a racing antelope, the length of his stride astounding. Then, as he closes, he measures that stride to time his clash, gauging his footing to compensate for the power of his swing. The leading traitor does not judge its momentum with the same care. Significantly larger than Sigismund, the World Eater is wild in its sprint.

They meet.

The World Eater is ploughed off its feet, and its ungoverned impetus carries its ruptured mass, tumbling and cartwheeling in the dust. It is almost split in two. The impact does not even slow Sigismund down. Without breaking stride, he moves on past the kill, and collides with a second World Eater, meeting its charge with such force, the traitor is stopped cold and hurled onto its back. Two more close, galloping at the Champion.

Sigismund skids to a halt, kicking dust. He rotates his sword, and stabs it down, like a dagger, to finish the traitor he knocked flat, then pivots to meet the next to arrive, putting the full force of his strength and twist into a two-handed blow that slices the World Eater through the chest and skull.

A handful of Templar Brethren have broken from the main fight, moving in to support Sigismund's assault. He allows them to deal with the stragglers. His attention is fixed on one particularly large brute.

It is a true monster, twice his size, its Cataphractii plate swollen and malformed to give it the bulk and aspect of a prehistoric bear: ridge-backed, heavy-shouldered, its head low, its arms like trees. It is a pack-leader, the remains of its half-circle crest evidence of some rank or status. Its name is long gone, probably unknown even to itself. As he approaches it, Sigismund raises his blade to his brow, a salute that might seem mocking but for its absolute sincerity. The World Eater bellows a roar back at

Sigismund, spittle spraying from a peg-toothed ogre mouth. Its chainaxe swings.

Sigismund rolls under the blow. He rights himself, and the black sword removes the axe-head in one stroke. The World Eater casts the useless haft aside, and draws a biedhander the size of a pole-arm. It chops the greatsword at Sigismund, and he is forced to start backwards to evade. Even at a distance, Keeler can hear the whoop of the giant blade as it cleaves the air.

The World Eater starts scything the biedhander at Sigismund. The sheer reach of its strike seems impossible to counter. Sigismund is obliged to retreat repeatedly, out of the path of each slice that comes at him. He can't get past or around that reach. He can't get close enough to inflict damage.

He goes for the sword instead. His black blade circles in his hand. Sigismund begins to connect. Each strike, blade against blade, chimes like a dull bell. Sparks fly where edge meets edge. With unsettling skill, he fights not the warrior, but the blade, turning it aside, parrying, deflecting. Each individual moment, each block and stroke, counts. He doesn't need to know the end of the fight, just the next step to get there, the now and the here, one blow at a time.

He drives in, little by little, forcing the beast to shorten its guard in an effort to land a blow. Any blow will do. One strike from that greatsword will be all it takes.

But the greatsword seems unable to touch him, even though he is right there, pushing himself directly at it. Sparks whizz and dance. Metal scale flies from colliding blade edges.

The World Eater suddenly lowers its sword, allowing the tip to drag in the dust. Keeler doesn't understand what's happening at first.

'The wrist…' Zhi-Meng blurts out, startled. His mindsight is perceiving details that her eyes can't.

Then she sees it. Sigismund has cut the distance so sharply, placing himself well inside the greatsword's lethal scope, he has managed to wound the World Eater's arm. The speed required is breathtaking, too fast for her to follow. Sigismund parried the biedhander aside, then was able to swing again before the greatsword scythed back, almost severing the World Eater's limb just below the wrist.

The traitor stumbles backwards, roaring, still dragging the biedhander with

its useless grip, black blood jetting from the yawning split at the base of its hand. It can see what's coming. It lashes out with its left arm, throwing a defensive punch that could demolish a wall. Sigismund ducks it, aims the tip of his black blade at the World Eater's throat, and thrusts.

It dies almost soundlessly, its larynx and windpipe slit. Wordless froth bubbles out of its gulping mouth. The entire length of the black blade is protruding between its shoulder blades.

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7:ix

How to survive victory

‘Again, in respect, I offer you quick mercy to spare you the horror that is coming.’

‘I would p-prefer you let us live,’ replies Sindermann. He stands up and tries to clear his throat. Fear is still lodged in his gullet like a cold stone. ‘We are just observers. If history is about to end, as you suggest, I would appreciate the chance to record what remains of it.’

Ahriman looks at him. He seems almost amused by Sindermann’s clumsy attempt to leverage survival.

‘What history would you record, Kyril Sindermann?’ he asks.

‘Perhaps… your reasons for coming here?’ Sindermann suggests. ‘Perhaps… some understanding of the… the *other side* in this conflict?’

Ahriman utters a small, contemptuous laugh. He looks at the rows of books and the fragile artworks.

‘I’ve come to this place alone, ahead of the annihilation, in the hope that I might salvage something. I have been here before, not long ago, but too briefly. I had no chance to study its contents. It is, after all, a repository of all the Emperor’s profound learning. It will burn, entirely, along with

everything else, very soon. I would like to save, or at least read, what I can before it is erased.’

‘Won’t your… Warmaster think you delinquent,’ asks Sindermann, ‘that you have stolen away here rather than remain in the fight?’

‘I hardly care,’ Ahriman replies, ‘and I doubt he will. There are more than enough killers unleashed today. Horus has won, and the Emperor has lost. I find myself on the winning side, but…’

‘But?’ Sindermann asks.

‘My Legion has also lost. Lost too much. It has suffered too greatly in this cause. We were, in many respects, forced into our role in this civil war, by the domineering will of Horus, and by the Emperor’s diffident disregard. So I am here, Kyril Sindermann, not for Horus Lupercal, but for my kin, the Thousand Sons. It is personal. Redemptive. The Emperor always claimed he could not help us in our anguish, and that claim was supported by the Sigillite and the Selenar. But I think he lied. And if he did, the truth he was withholding is probably here, and I would find it before it is razed by the barbarian horde.’

The figure drifts to the nearest bookshelf, and glides a shadow-hand along the spines of the books.

‘Further,’ Ahriman murmurs, ‘I believe there are other secrets here, fundamental wisdoms that the Thousand Sons should obtain if they are to have any significance in the world that awaits us. The future will not be easy, even for the victors.’

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7:x

Strategies for denial

A thousand souls were used up the last time the Sanction was enacted, a fraction of what is being done now. The lines of caskets seem endless, but he knows they are painfully finite. Hundreds have perished already. Hundreds more are exhausting as he watches. How many more wait outside for admission? How many more can be brought in to stoke the fire? Sooner or later there will be no more left to deliver.

And then…

And then, the final choices will have to be made. The last few dark and bitter decisions, none of which he ever wanted to make.

The Talisman. The last resort. The unthinkable act.

‘A safer distance, my lord,’ Abidemi insists. Vulkan steps back with him, not because he needs to be safe, but because it is time to consult. When the unthinkable comes, if it comes, he will stride headlong into those flames to reach the Talisman and, as Un-Maker, he–

The last of his seniors await him some distance away in the shade of an adamant shield. Casryn, Halferphess, Mouhausen, along with senior Custodes and other Sisters.

‘Make your report,’ he says as he joins them. They bow their heads. He can see the tension in them. A few cough at the smell of his singed cloak and overheated plate.

There is no part of their review that isn’t dire. The end is upon them, upon them and the stood-still world, and it is more terrible than even the worst Vulkan had imagined. Uzkarel, the ranking Sentinel, reports that the Sanctum is entirely invaded, both by direct physical assault and by the insidious convolutions of the warp, which have riddled the fabric of the Palace like worms in meat. Mouhausen, the Chosen, relates that no signal whatsoever has been established with Vulkan’s father and the Anabasis assault, and that, further, contact between the Throne Room and Hegemon Command may soon be lost. Halferphess can report no contact with, or activity from, the Astronomican, and no further communication has been heard from Guilliman’s liberation fleets, which are presumed lost or adrift in the warp storms saturating the Solar Realm. Casryn signs that the supply of psycho-able candidates to support the Sigillite through the action of the Unspoken Sanction will last another hour at best.

As for the empyric anomaly, it remains, steadily increasing in magnitude, its location and cause unknown, except that it is demonstrably not a consequence of Malcador’s decline.

They go on, each in turn, grimly detailing one aspect of Terra’s doom after another. Vulkan listens, attentive, but his tired mind purrs all the while. It is clear that the war raging throughout the Inner Sanctum is a holding action at best. The Astartes, the glorious Custodes, the last brave divisions of the human army… They cannot prevail. All they can do is rage to slow down the inexorable encroachment of the enemy. The siege is ending. The physical war is lost.

On Terra, at least. Vulkan fights back woeful thoughts and reminds himself that there is still some shred of hope. Anabasis. Just because contact has been lost, it doesn’t mean that Anabasis has. His father’s power is immense and dreadful, and the Angel, Rogal, Constantin and companies of the very greatest warriors stand with him. As they wait here, helpless, in the shadow of the safety shield, it is possible… still possible that his father’s war has breached the Lupercal’s lair high above them, and that any second, word will come of the Arch-traitor’s defeat and the capture of the *Vengeful Spirit*.

At any second, at any moment. It is still possible that salvation, perhaps

even victory, can be wrested from the fires of damnation, even in this bleak and final hour.

And if not salvation, if not victory, then at least Horus may be denied. Vulkan is ready for that eventuality. He is ready to use the Talisman. If Anabasis has failed, and they have lost, then he will, at least, not permit Horus Lupercal to win.

There is another possibility too, another variable, one almost as grim and unthinkable as the Talisman that is his to unleash.

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7:xi

Mass expression sampling

‘Where is he?’ she asks, climbing the stairs into the Retreat’s laboratoria levels. Xanthus is at one of the windows, gazing out. He turns. She can see the fear in him.

‘He’s working,’ he says.

‘He’s not here.’

‘Upstairs,’ says Xanthus. ‘Next level.’

‘You’re supposed to be watching him,’ she snaps.

‘I am.’

‘Like a hawk, Chosen One.’

He nods, ashamed. He gestures at the window. ‘I was… I was just looking,’ he says. ‘How bad is it?’

‘How bad could it be?’ Andromeda asks.

Xanthus shrugs.

‘Right. Well, it’s worse than that.’

She strides up the next flight. Xanthus, distracted, follows her.

The floor above is another section of the laboratorium. There are five large chrome vats arranged centrally like the petals of a flower, and the chamber

lighting is a sterile blue. Large incinerator units for the disposal of organic waste stand against one wall. Fo works at a central console, adjusting the admixture values of biochemicals and nutrients that feed the vats from tanks built into the ceiling.

She looks at one of the vats. It's a bio-structor unit similar, she imagines, to the flesh-weaving looms with which the Sigillite first crafted the fabled Astartes template. Perhaps these are the very machines on which the initial work was undertaken, the prototype devices from which the project's genetic manufactories were extrapolated.

No wonder the Retreat was so firmly secured.

The unit is warm. It hums. Through the cloudy glass lid, sealed tight, she can see a primordial slurry of biological materials frothing and fusing.

'These units are active,' she says.

'Of course,' says Fo (though I am not really listening because I am too busy concentrating).

'They're *active*, Fo.'

'What of it?'

She crosses to him. 'The design refinement of your phage weapon is a theoretical exercise,' she says. 'The cogitators and samplers on the floor below should be sufficient–'

'Well, they're not,' he replies, glaring at her in annoyance for the interruption. 'They are nothing *like* sufficient.'

'Fo–'

He sets down the cellular-patterning wafers he is carefully preparing.

'Do you want this finished or don't you, Selenar?'

'There is no practical aspect to this work,' she says. 'None at all. You're gene-cooking, Fo. The flesh-makers are primed. You're selecting anatomical templates–'

'Of course I am!' Fo snaps. 'You want this done correctly, and you want this done quickly. Theoretical treatises are not enough. Go downstairs. Check them. I've *done* them already. My theoretical model must be tested practically before we claim success. I told you this. Systematic tests–'

'This is not… *that!*' she exclaims, gesturing to the vats.

Fo leans towards her and grins.

'A few gene samples aren't going to cut it,' he says. 'This laboratorium hardly excels in scope. I'm using the cellular samples to culture sufficient

quantities of biomatter so that the biomechanical phage can be properly tested. Mass expression sampling.’

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7:xii

Corswain at bay

Corswain sees Cypher fall. He sees the lone figure, high up on the promontory that Adophel named *Tilted Rock*, drop to its knees, hands clawing at its face.

There's no breaking from the fight he's in, but he breaks anyway. Monstrous Death Guard warriors are storming the bulwarks of *Axe-Beard Ledge*, their armour glossy in the drooling rain, and glaucous in the lightning flash. Winds born of Chaos howl up the contested pass and assail the First Legion's crumbling ramparts. The air reeks of putrescine.

'Hold!' he yells at Vanital. Vanital, and the eight Dark Angels with him, redouble their efforts to drive the enemy back, scrambling in the mire at the cliff edge. Corswain disengages. He starts to run. Rain sprays from his plate as he leaps from the end of *Axe-Beard*, and drops onto the fighting platform below. Bolt-rounds chase him. The gale drags at him. He runs the length of the battered platform, and then bounds up the connecting staircase bolted to the overhang of rock. Two mass-reactives sear past his head. A third strikes the staircase beside him, fracturing the metal handrail in a burst of flame and shrapnel.

He reaches the top. *Cleft Rock* platform. Just minutes earlier, it had been the focus of an enemy assault, but now it is eerily still, the attack repulsed and the defenders repositioned to counter the *Axe-Beard* escalade. He runs along it, leaping the corpses of the dead, pelted by rain. The far end is a tattered gap of shredded steel, blown out by enemy rocket grenades. He pulls up, looks across the gulf to the far side, where a section of surviving gun-deck still clings to the base of *Tilted Rock*. Too far to leap, even for him. Too far to fall.

He looks up again. He can no longer see Cypher, for the lord's body is obscured by the crest of the high rock. But he can see Death Guard warriors scaling the face of the rock, clawing their way to the summit like spiders on a wall.

He backs up, braces himself to take a run. Even then he knows – *knows!* – that the jump is suicidal. He looks for another way. He sheathes his sword, and begins to climb the cliff face instead. It seems little short of impossible. The rock is wet, almost slimy. Crevices refuse his fingertips, and cracks crumble beneath his grip. He perseveres, longing for an operational jump pack. But they've got nothing left, no power, no fuel, scarcely any munitions. They've burned through it all keeping Typhus at bay. They have been reduced to blades and bones and brute force.

But Corswain knows if the enemy reaches Lord Cypher, and delivers their butchery, it will be the end. Cypher is the lion heart of their defence. His appearance energised their hopes and hearts. The enemy knows that. It knows that killing Cypher will gut the Dark Angels, and win the field.

The rock face splinters under his grip. Stone chunks tumble and fall. Corswain forces his fingers and toe-tips into the rock, clawing and kicking fissures to cling to. He clings on.

He forces his way upwards.

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7:xiii

The path

‘Yes,’ says Abaddon, rousing from his miserable reverie. ‘I damn well do have control. Advance the men, Baraxa. We have to find him. We have to hope that he–’

He doesn’t finish the thought. Baraxa barks a command, and the assault squads begin to move in past them.

‘If this is Service Eight-Twelve,’ says Sycar, ‘it should join the Tertiary Spinal. From there, we can go up-hull to the bridge.’

Abaddon nods. Sycar begins to issue curt deployment commands, and the Sons of Horus spread out. Abaddon turns to follow.

He pauses.

Control, not controlled.

He feels his pulse elevate. He has denied the gifts of the immaterium, sworn off their treacherous benefits. This was always a soldier’s war, and it should only *ever* have been that.

But he knows it’s tainted him too. It’s tainted all of them, through the choices they’ve made and the paths they’ve followed, whether they acknowledge it or not. Abaddon has not embraced it like damn Ikari or Fal

or Dorgaddon, but he has followed his father too far into its shadow.

Control, not controlled.

Is he damned too? Is he lost without even realising it?

Control, not controlled.

‘Ezekyle?’

‘Wait…’ he murmurs. He looks down at his hands. Is he a fool to think himself free? Is that just another of the lies? Or is he still his own master? Does he still retain control?

And if he does, what gifts will it give him?

‘Ezekyle?’

He kicks down the shop’s door. The old wood disintegrates, friable as paper, and clouds the air with fibres. Inside, it’s caked in years of dirt and neglect. There are rotting almanacs and ephemerides on a desk, a cracked crystal ball on a stand, an overturned chair with carved basilisk arms. On the walls hang old charts showing the regions of the heavens, and diagrams of splayed hands, where the lines of the palms are enumerated and described. All the hands on display have more than five digits. Everything is swathed with cobwebs so thick they look as though they have been draped with lace. Incongruously, two baleful blue decontam emitters shine from the ancient, water-sagged ceiling.

Abaddon pushes his way through. He hears Baraxa calling his name, and Sycar’s Justaerin crunching in behind him. The astrologer’s shop has no back wall. Through the gloom, he enters a small, musty courtyard. The ground is partly ancient flagstones, but it’s tilted at an angle and overlaps a section of deck plate. There are three golden statues on the paved section, but they are half-sunk into the stone, askew against the tilt of the flagstones as though their bases are set on another, intersecting plane. They are leaning at such an angle, they should topple over, but the stone encases them to thigh level, so they look like men sinking into quicksand. Two of the statues have no heads. The third has a head that is in no way human.

Abaddon looks away. He has no time for statues, however grotesque. In this small space, this nameless yard, different places have been compressed into each other, faulting and lifting like miniature tectonic plates as one shoves the next out of true.

‘With me,’ he growls. Rain is pattering on him and the small yard. It’s not water from a burst duct higher up in the ship: it’s actual rain. He clambers

over the pivoted horizontals of the ground. There's an open hatchway ahead, set into the mossy stone wall. He recognises it.

The air formicates with whispers and murmuring. He ignores them. He doesn't care if they are warning him, or admonishing him, or guiding him, or even praising him. He doesn't care.

He goes through the hatch, bolter ready.

Before him lies the command bridge of the *Vengeful Spirit*.

This is exactly where he wanted to be. His impulsive short-cut has shaved thirty minutes off the time it should take to reach the bridge from Service Eight-Twelve.

Have I found this way in? he wonders. Or has it found me?

Or is it my father's will?

Control, not controlled. He is determined to believe it's the former. The thought fills him with an alluring rush of confidence. It is what his father used to call *enargeia*, an instant of profound clarity. The Lupercal spoke of these insights as the moments that defined him, and allowed him to understand his true self. How long since his father experienced an instant like this?

Abaddon grins to himself. He has come to trust nothing and know no one, but he trusts himself. He is Abaddon. He is strong. He's the First damn Captain of the Sons of Horus. When he finds his father, he will protect him. They will stand together. They will navigate the path ahead together.

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7:xiv

The teeth of the Lion

Corswain hauls himself over the lip of the cliff at the base of *Tilted Rock*. He is swathed in darkness, a darkness split every few seconds by the stinging sear of grounding lightning. It is one of the highest parts of the defensive position at the head of the pass. The force of the gale upon him has dropped now he is in the rock's wind shadow, and he can no longer hear the din of battle ringing from the half-dozen choke points on the slopes below. The rage of their last stand is lost in the scalding hiss of the torrential rain and the sizzle of insects.

He gets to his feet, his limbs aching from a vertical ascent that should have been impossible, and was most certainly insane. Everywhere he looks, the black air is full of gleaming dots: raindrops and blowflies, swirling like a solid mass.

He plunges through the downpour, sliding his blade from its scabbard. He has to reach Cypher. Cypher must not fall.

Cypher may already be slain.

He charges up the slope of *Tilted Rock*. Rainwater is flowing back down it in ribbons and streams, little flash floods of run-off that make the stone

treacherous. The water is stained black. Is it blood? Is it his blood?

Through the rain, he sees the broad summit of the rock, raised like a jutting altar above the pass below. He comes up into the wind, and feels its weight buffeting him. He sees Cypher, sprawled on his side, unmoving. He sees the ebon shapes of the Death Guard warriors clawing over the rock edge. Their infernal climb up the natural ramparts of the gorge has been more direct and, as he feared, much swifter than his. Determination and transhuman strength were his only scaling tools. They were raised aloft by more unearthly powers.

And *they* are unearthly. They are terror-things, hulking brutes of plate that seems black-lacquered in the rain. He can smell the foetor of their diseased forms. He can see the hooks and blades they carry, the furnace gleeds of their eye slits. Several of them are already within striking distance of Cypher's body.

He is too late.

But he is not alone.

He sees Bruktas, the stump of his missing arm crudely wrapped and splinted. Corswain is clearly not the only soul to have noticed Lord Cypher's plight. The last Corswain saw of Bruktas, he was being carried off the lines to the care of the Apothecaries. Perhaps it was from there, from the vantage of the shelters near the portal, that Bruktas saw Cypher fall. Whatever the circumstance, Bruktas is here. He has rushed to this defence with equal haste. Now he stands, a Dark Angel alone, grievously maimed, protecting Cypher's body, fighting off his would-be murderers from all sides.

The wind-blown blood streaming down the rock is the blood of the XIV.

Roaring his father's name, Corswain slams in beside Bruktas, his whirling sword smashing a Death Guard warrior off the edge in a spray of rain and blood. Now he is at the peak, he is exposed to the wind's full force again, and he fights to steady himself lest the blore, a tempest summoned by chaogenous malice, sweeps him away.

He blocks the swinging maul of another, then carves the plated devil apart before it can assault Bruktas on his wounded side. Leaning into the wind, he cuts himself a place beside the struggling battle-brother. In seconds, they are battling two or three enemies apiece, parrying blows, and turning blades aside. Bruktas would have been killed long since but for the tapering space

of the rock's summit, which favours a well-placed defender against a mob of attackers who have to clear the lip before they can rise and engage. Now there are two of them, *two* defenders firmly planted. The bodies of Death Guard warriors litter the edges of the summit, some half-draped over the drop. Others tumble back into the darkness, heads split or crushed. Corswain clears another of the Death Guard from the lip, then sees steel grapples fly up and pinch into the rock. He struggles towards them, braving the blast of gale and rain, but waits until he sees the trailing lines tighten before he hacks his blade through them. A taut line means it is not merely rope dropping down the cliff face.

Raindrops ping off the ropes as they cinch tight. Corswain drags his blade through them and hears, above the pummel of the wind, the sound of metal avalanches.

Another Death Guard appears, head and shoulders first, hauling his mass onto the rock. Corswain mashes his heel into the brute's visor, and kicks him into space. He sees the traitor drop away, arms flailing, eyes burning.

Once more, the tempest tries to carry Corswain off with his victim. He steadies himself.

He hears Bruktas cry out behind him. Four of Typhus' bastards have made the top together, and one has brought the struggling Dark Angel to his knees with a warhammer. Bruktas is still fighting, trying to shield Cypher's body with his own. Corswain stoops, unfastens one of the enemy's useless grappling hooks from the split stone with his left hand, and then turns on the foe, his sword swinging in his right hand, the hook, a makeshift weapon, in his left. A warrior hacks at him, steam rising from his fevered plate. Corswain blocks the heavy blade with the haft of the hook, the cut length of rope still flying from the base-ring like a tassel. He wrenches his opponent's weapon aside, breaking his guard, and thrusts his sword into his torso-plate. Abnormal fluids spurt from the split, followed by streams of living insects that pour out of the wound like blood. Corswain strikes the half-dead traitor away with the steel hook in an impulse of pure revulsion. The Death Guard warrior staggers, dripping insects and stringy pus, and collapses into another of his kind, sliding them both over the cliff. Corswain ploughs past, bringing the hook down in a powerful overhand chop that cracks across the pauldron of the next traitor. Then he pulls hard, stabbing two of the grapple's claws into the warrior's shoulder, and yanking the man forwards.

Unable to resist the drag of the hooks spiked into his back, the traitor falls onto his hands and knees, and Corswain slices his sword through the base of his spine.

Another is already upon him. Corswain takes a blow across his right pauldron and, as he stumbles to keep his feet, he's enveloped in the choking cloud of beetles that seems to shroud the traitor like smoke. He hears their chirring buzz. He hears the diseased whispers hidden in the whir of wing-cases.

The Death Guard turns aside. Bruktas has regained his footing, and is driving blows into the traitor's flank. Corswain can see that Bruktas is sorely impaired, and growing ever weaker, but his fury is undimmed. This is the courage bred by Caliban. These are the teeth of the Lion.

Corswain flanks Bruktas, becoming the arm he has lost, slicing traitors off the jawline of the rock.

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7:xv

Out of this dust

‘Get up,’ says Leetu.

Oll doesn’t stir from the block where he’s sitting. His head is in his hands.

‘Get up,’ Leetu repeats.

Oll looks up at him. His anguish is so great, he can’t speak.

‘Yes, they’re dead,’ says Leetu. ‘You couldn’t save them. I couldn’t save them. I’m sorry.’

Oll shakes his head wordlessly.

‘I’m sorry I’m no good at speeches,’ says Leetu. ‘That’s Grammaticus’ job. But he’s not capable of a rousing speech right now.’

Oll scowls at the proto-Astartes. The dust is still settling all around them. It’s thick, like fallout, and they are both filthy. It’s going to hang in the air for the rest of time.

John is just visible twenty metres away, picking through the rubble of the city wall, searching for bodies. He’s holding his arm to his body. It’s badly strained and he’s torn ligaments. He’s bound his jaw and the lower part of his face with rags. His face is a bloody mess, dust sticking to the make-do, blood-wet bandage. Given the extent of his injuries, Oll isn’t sure how

John’s even conscious, let alone standing.

‘Are you giving up then?’ Leetu asks, fixing him with unblinking indigo eyes.

‘Leetu–’

‘You know what Grammaticus would tell you. You can imagine. We’ve come this far. We have to keep going. Yes, they’re dead, but if you give up now, what was the point? Their deaths will be worthless. You want them to be worthless?’

‘Shut up,’ says Oll. He rises slowly to his feet, coughing in the dust.

‘It’s a fair question.’

‘I want them to have never been part of this,’ says Oll. ‘I want them to never have followed me. I want them, all of them, to have stayed where they were, never to have walked this path with me.’

‘They’d still be dead,’ says Leetu. ‘This way round, their lives bought something.’

‘What?’

‘A little longer for you. We’ve got to find that knife. We’ve got to finish this.’

‘Just the three of us?’

‘Persson, we weren’t much to begin with. I liked them, your companions. They were brave, but they weren’t strong. We were never a fighting force. We’re not much weaker without them than we were with them.’

‘That’s callous. What is that? Astartes tactical pragmatism?’

‘Just an observation.’

Oll spits dust-black phlegm.

‘Actae–’ he says.

‘Well, she was the strongest of us. She might be alive. She might even have saved the girl. But if she survived, that bastard Erebus might be alive too. So… here’s your tactical pragmatism.’

Oll glares at him. He clambers away, hauling himself over the block debris of the fallen wall towards John. Grammaticus’ injuries are painful to see. The dirty rags binding his face look like they’re holding his head together. What little of his face is visible beneath the bandages is bruised and swollen. His mouth, the epicentre of the damage, is entirely wrapped with blood-soaked strips. He holds his traumatised arm against his chest like a claw. He looks at Oll dourly as Oll approaches, wiping grit from his eyes

with his good hand.

‘Sit down and rest,’ Oll says. ‘John, we won’t find anything.’ There are acres of fuming rubble around them.

John grunts something from behind the rags covering his mouth.

‘What?’

John growls. He can’t talk. His mouth and jaw are too messed up. His working hand moves instead, signing clumsy hortcode.

Shut up. Screw you. Search.

Oll coughs again, and shrugs. He starts to search, moving parallel to John. Leetu joins them.

They find Zybes about ten minutes later. He’s lying on his back, the spar of Graft’s limb still wedged through his chest. A large block of the fallen wall has landed on his head and shoulders, crushing them. Oll’s glad he can’t see Hebet’s face. He’s too ashamed to meet those eyes, even dead.

John crouches, and searches around the body. He grunts again to get their attention. He’s found the knife.

It’s broken into three fragments.

Oll picks them up, and cups them in his hands. It’s just rock now, just dead stone. It’s as though the blade has been killed, and all its properties are gone. Oll puts them in his jacket pocket.

‘Persson?’

Leetu has found the ball of thread, about twenty metres away. It’s much smaller than before: the long drop off the wall and then its bouncing passage across the ground beneath has played out a great deal of its length. Leetu scoops it up, and begins to wind up the loose, trailing line. The thread, which snakes off into the rubble, keeps snagging.

‘Wait–’ Oll says. It’s too late. Leetu has pulled at the thread to free it, and the twine, pinned under a rock or boulder, snaps.

‘Well, that’s it,’ sighs Oll.

‘We’d never gather it all up,’ says Leetu, winding in the last loose metres.

‘It’s no use now it’s broken,’ says Oll.

That’s just symbolic, John signs.

‘Yes,’ says Oll. ‘Exactly.’

‘You’re reading too much into it,’ says Leetu, holding the thread out to him.

‘I’m not. Everything’s symbolic. The knife was symbolic, the thread… this

whole war.’

‘Symbolic of what?’ asks Leetu.

‘Damned if I know,’ says Oll.

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7:xvi

Final orders

‘Well… your opinion?’ Ilya Ravallion asks.

‘It is a radical proposal,’ replies Sandrine Icaro. She stands at Ilya’s station, reading the tactical plan Ilya has set out on a data-slate.

‘I think we passed into the realm of radical some time ago, mistress,’ Ilya replies. Both of them are trying to ignore the scent of smoke in the air, and the boom and rattle of conflict. It’s very close now. The Archenemy has penetrated the Sanctum. Significant portions of the final fortress have already fallen to traitor assault. Reports say hostile units are advancing on the Tower of the Hegemon. Each thump and shiver of warfare seems closer than the last, and each one makes Icaro flinch involuntarily. Ilya notes that Icaro has taken to carrying her old Komag assault weapon with her as she moves from desk to desk.

Ilya’s proposal is as crude as it is simple. Lion’s Gate port, which has held out beyond all expectation, possesses some of the most potent surface-based weapons in the Palace Dominions. Prohibited by Icaro’s command from firing at the traitor fleet, those weapon systems are now wasted. Ilya’s proposition is to re-task them to fire surface-to-surface, aiming at the

Sanctum, or more specifically, the Palatine Zone adjacent to the Sanctum. The invasion of the final fortress can't be prevented, but the enemy strengths, accumulating in vast numbers around the Delphic as they attempt entry, could be seriously depleted by the unconventional use of orbital guns.

It wouldn't be much, and the risk of misfire is great in a warzone where all targeting sensoria, and even relative distances, are untrustworthy. But it would be something. It does, however, feel entirely counterintuitive to have the Palace open fire on itself.

Icaro glances at the Chosen, Sidozie, for his take. He too is distracted, but not, it seems, by the mounting noise of warfare echoing through the halls outside the Rotunda. A few minutes earlier, the defence details outside the main hatch admitted another of the Chosen to the Rotunda. His name, Ilya understands, is Hassan, a senior man. Hassan's clothes are torn and soaked in blood, and he is visibly shaken. With him came a huge Custodes warrior, and two women that Ilya presumes are members of the infamous Silent Sisterhood. The Custodian is an arresting sight, not so much because of the appalling wounds he is carrying, but because he is still standing despite them. Medicae personnel are attending him. Hassan sits nearby, silent, recovering his composure.

Icaro makes her decision.

'If you are still able to contact Lion's Gate,' she tells Ilya, 'then communicate this plan to them. Get their assessment of feasibility.'

'And?' Ilya asks.

'If they can do it,' Icaro says, 'then you may instruct them to begin.'

Ilya gets to work, hunting for a hardline link that's still viable.

Sidozie and Icaro cross to Hassan.

He looks up at them. 'We were ambushed,' he says. 'Traitor Astartes and…'

He trails off.

'Where?' asks Icaro.

'Blaxis Interlink,' says the ravaged Custodian standing nearby. He doesn't have to explain how close to the Throne Room adytum that is.

'I don't understand how enemy penetration can be so extensive so quickly,' Sidozie begins.

'They are not coming from *outside*,' the Sentinel growls. 'They are inside. Everywhere.'

‘Companion Raja is correct,’ says Hassan. ‘They are forcing mass exoplanar entry. They are coming out of the damn walls.’

He rises to his feet. Sidozie reaches out to steady him, but Hassan refuses the hand.

‘It’s just shock,’ he says. ‘We barely got out of the ambush alive. They killed… They killed Sentinels… Sisters… A full escort detail. We broke clear, and made for the nearest safe location.’

‘Here?’ asks Icaro. ‘Surely the adytum was far closer?’

‘You need to grasp this, mistress,’ Raja snarls.

She stares at him. It is astonishing to see the brutal talon wounds in the flesh of his face, throat and exposed shoulders visibly closing and healing in front of her, open lacerations knitting to shiny pink creases in his bloodstained skin. It is more astonishing that the Sentinel is expressing no sign of pain or discomfort.

‘The Hegemon was closer,’ he says. ‘Dimensional geometry and spatial interrelation is collapsing throughout the Sanctum. Schematics and floorplans can no longer be trusted. The warp is corrupting the fabric of the final fortress.’

His declaration is punctuated by a particularly loud detonation outside. Dust and fragments of ceiling tile flutter down from the Rotunda’s dome, and a brief hush falls across the hundreds of operators and tacticians frantically at work at their desks.

‘I need a link to the Throne Room,’ says Hassan. ‘Is that still possible?’

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‘I will consider the use of anything.’

Vulkan lets them all finish their reports, then bids they step back. He draws Moriana Mouhausen aside.

‘It is my understanding,’ he says to her, ‘that the Chosen, on Malcador’s instruction, have secured the so-called Terminus Sanction and its architect.’

She looks surprised.

‘One does not command the Throne of Terra without being privy to such things,’ he says. ‘I had Hassan brief me. He said that Malcador’s intent was for the weapon to reside in the hands of the Chosen, rather than under the guard of the Custodes.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ she replies. ‘Efforts were made to do just that shortly after my master took the Throne.’

‘And were they successful, Chosen One? Can you tell me that?’

‘I cannot, lord. Hassan delegated the duty to my colleague Xanthus. But neither I nor Hassan have had further report. All communication has broken down. The Sanctum is, quite literally, in chaos. Xanthus may be dead, or his effort failed. The criminal Fo may be dead–’

‘So we have no idea if the weapon is secure, or if it is in our control–’

‘My lord,’ says Mouhausen, ‘even if the weapon still exists, there is some doubt that it is even functional. Fo is notoriously deceitful, and few of us thought it would work. The principles–’

Vulkan raises his hand sharply.

‘I would know its status,’ he says. ‘If it still exists… Its functionality, its potential…’

‘You would deploy it, my lord?’ she asks, incredulous.

‘Annihilation is upon us, Chosen One,’ says Vulkan. ‘I will consider the use of anything. *Anything*.’

‘Xanthus may have been thwarted,’ she replies. ‘The weapon may still reside in the hands of the Legio Custodes, as Valdor wished.’

‘And they have not informed you of this?’

‘The Custodians keep their secrets, my lord.’

Vulkan snarls in annoyance, and Mouhausen jerks back in alarm.

‘This is no time for stupid games,’ says Vulkan, ‘no time for squabbles between the organs of authority. I will not have it.’

With an angry gesture, he beckons Uzkarel to them.

‘My lord primarch,’ says Uzkarel with a stiff nod of his head. The proconsul is a huge warrior, even by Custodes standards, almost as tall as Vulkan. The ribbed and sculpted gold of his helm and shoulder guards are shaped to resemble the mane of a vast lion.

‘You will make report at once of the fate of the Terminus weapon,’ says Vulkan.

Uzkarel’s eyes narrow. ‘Two of the Sodality of the Key were sent to secure it and the prisoner, my lord,’ he says.

‘And?’

The Custodian pauses, his neurosynergetics briefly engaged.

‘They were denied,’ he says. ‘There was a lack of directive clarity. The criminal Fo was left in the custody of Sentinel Amon.’

‘And where are they now?’

‘Unknown, my lord. Neurosynergetic contact and direct comms are generally disrupted over any distance. The laboratory and the area of securement both lie in a part of the Sanctum that is overrun by the enemy and–’

‘And the location of the weapon itself?’

‘Also unknown, my lord.’

‘Find it,’ Vulkan tells them both. ‘Find it, and find this Fo. I want solid, confirmed information on its status. If it is lost, then it is lost. If it still exists, I want it brought here.’

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7:xviii

‘Xanthus’

‘This is not what we talked about, Fo,’ says Andromeda.

‘It’s what’s necessary,’ he replies.

She stares through the fogged lid of another unit.

‘You’re culturing cells–’

‘Strains to simulate the designated targets,’ Fo says, ‘along with control expressions of baseline human so we can be sure the phage affects only those targets and doesn’t move aggressively into the rest of the population. I know what I’m doing.’

Fo scoops up a handful of old notebooks from the console and waves them at her. A few loose pages flutter out.

‘This is how the Sigillite did it,’ says Fo (I am still quite rapt in admiration of the old Regent’s mind). ‘He states his methodology quite clearly. This is how he achieved the Astartes project in such a short space of time. It should have taken centuries, but your beloved Emperor was impatient.’

‘People…’ Andromeda begins.

Fo glares. ‘Don’t be sentimental. Not people. Not even organisms. Just inert, bio-fabbed cellular material, typed and catalogued according to

organic source. Just soup. Human soup.’

Andromeda glowers at him. ‘I think you forget who and what I am, Fo. I think you forget my areas of expertise.’

‘I do not at all, Selenar, which is why I find it surprising that I have to explain any of this to you. And it’s not just the Sigillite who recommends this approach.’

He strides across to a workstation set under the stairs, and starts to rummage through more files and paperwork.

‘All of his chief scientists and the gene-masters concur. Malcador kept copies of every senior technician’s work, and I’ve read it all.’

‘You’ve read it all?’

‘Of course,’ he sneers. ‘They all used the same technique. Baskow! Mass expression sampling. Astarte and DeVie! Broad redundancy cellular screening. And here, Ezekiel Sedayne, another quite superior mind! Bulk bio-mat analysis.’

He turns to look at her. She can see an odd anger in his eyes.

‘Do not question my approach again,’ he says (for I have had quite enough of her objections).

‘Amon will not approve of this,’ she says carefully.

‘Are you going to tell him?’

‘I am somewhat obligated to do so, yes.’

‘He has his orders,’ says Fo, ‘and he is scrupulous in the performance of them. The Custodes are ruthless creatures, Andromeda-17. They are shockingly pragmatic. This process gets the job done and fulfils his orders in the most efficient way. He doesn’t need to know the specifics.’

She hesitates. She considers pressing the alarm Amon gave her, and summoning him.

‘The cultures,’ she says, ‘they absolutely have to be destroyed when you’re finished. Not discarded. Destroyed.’

Fo nods.

‘The waste incinerators are already ignited and waiting,’ he replies.

‘This is human genetic material?’ asks Xanthus, peering down through the condensation-misted window of one of the vats.

‘One of my primary sample groups,’ Fo replies. ‘Or, as I like to call it, “Xanthus”.’

‘What?’ Xanthus says, looking up sharply.

‘It’s you,’ says Fo. ‘You gave me a sample, and I’ve cultured it.’

‘I never–’ Xanthus begins. He’s staring at the bio-structor in utter revulsion.

‘I was concerned at the age of the Baseline Terran-Human samples available in this facility,’ says Fo. ‘Some are two centuries old. Even with the most careful storage, they may have suffered some deterioration. I wanted a fresh culture as a double-safe control, and you obliged.’

‘I had no idea you were going to–’ Xanthus stammers.

‘You’re an idiot,’ Andromeda tells him.

‘No, he’s a champion of the Emperor,’ says Fo. ‘We had a whole talk about it.’

Fo walks over to Xanthus, who is gazing down at the warm, clotting fluid in the vat. He rests a bird-claw hand on Xanthus’ shoulder. Andromeda imagines there’s nothing comforting about it.

‘You know,’ Fo murmurs to Xanthus, ‘pound for pound, there’s probably more of you in that vat than outside of it.’

Xanthus recoils and pushes Fo’s hand away.

‘Chosen One,’ says Fo calmly, ‘you’re doing the Imperium a profound service. Don’t be graceless about it.’

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7:xix

This is what faith does

They leave the bodies of the traitors in the dust where they fell, sprawled like miniature versions of the dead giants around them. The Seconds regroup. The pilgrimage resumes its advance.

Sigismund walks back to take his place at Keeler's side. She says nothing. There's nothing anyone can say.

He is reassured by her acceptance of the savagery he is required to channel. From the moment he first encountered her, he found she possessed a purity of thought that he could only aspire to, despite a lifetime of discipline. He suspects she has no idea the effect she has had on the course of his life. Though they have only met a few times, she has made him see that his life is supposed to be hard and solitary, and that death and sacrifice come in different measures. She has taught him, more by example than in words, that it matters less that you gave your life for the Emperor and your bloodline, and more where you elected to stand to offer that life, the *now*, the *here*. Her impact on his thinking had been such that it has earned him the disfavour and censure of his Praetorian father, and thus she has also, in her way, taught him that shame is a fuel that can fire a man in ways that

mere courage cannot.

Duty, true duty, is not about honour, or valour, or fidelity. It is certainly not about reputation, or the estimation of others. True duty is about service. Others have seen him as prideful, because he has always striven for perfection as a warrior, but they have entirely misunderstood him. Reputation doesn't matter, nor honour, glory, nor fame. *He* doesn't matter. His service does. Devotion, complete and utter devotion, is its own end. Simple faith, requiring no proof or reward, is the sublime state. It is not learned or bestowed. It is autogenous.

He understands this. He believes she does too. They are utterly unalike, but they are alike in this.

'There will be more of them,' she says.

He nods. 'Are you afraid?' he asks.

She shakes her head.

'Not any more,' she says. She sounds surprised to hear herself say it. 'Whatever happens from here, not any more.'

Then she does understand, he thinks. That's what faith does. It takes away fear. When he found it, it took away fear, and self-conscious vanity, and all mortal concerns. It took away Sigismund and left a champion. He has given himself over to the purpose of the Throne of Man, and his love for the Emperor is absolute and unconditional. He is simply a sword.

He has no pride. He has no overweening honour that can be wounded or offended. He loves his estranged father so utterly that he will weather dishonour in his eyes in order to save him. One day.

This day, perhaps.

But as he walks, he does not waste thought on such speculation. Calm returns. The future is neither now nor here.

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7:xx

The secret knowledge of the Emperor

‘What is that future?’ asks Sindermann.

‘I cannot say, Kyril Sindermann.’

‘But I thought precognition was your forte?’

‘It is,’ says Ahriman, ‘but we currently exist in an instant of suspended time, so there is no future to read, and my sight is blocked. However, I can make conjecture. Horus has triumphed, and in triumph, he has become transcendent. If he is not a god, then he is very like one. The future, Kyril Sindermann, is one in which his ruinous dominion will be total. Those, like us, who stood at his side, will not be honoured. We will be relegated to subservience. That is not a prospect to be relished. So I will arm myself with the secret knowledge of the Emperor, and fortify the Thousand Sons, so we can carve out a place for ourselves, free of his will.

‘Unless,’ he adds, turning to look at them, ‘you happen to know if there is a work in this collection that lays out the methodology for killing a god?’

None of them reply.

‘You may observe,’ Ahriman decides. ‘But not obstruct. And you’ – he looks at the petrified archivist – ‘you will stop crying.’

The archivist whimpers at his direct attention.

‘She’s afraid of you,’ says Sindermann. ‘We all are. You are the enemy, and your aspect is intimidating.’

Ahriman pauses. The bone-black shadows composing him begin to flow and blur. The extravagant horns and plated segments of his wargear fold up like petals, retracting into his form with a series of metallic clicks like some intricate mechanism. He reveals himself to them as a man, tall but now unarmoured, dressed in a simple robe and black bodyglove. His eyes are deep-set and radiantly blue, and his mouth is clamped in a rictus, a permanent grimace that bares his clenched teeth and pulls the muscles of his throat into tight cords. His gums are black. There is something terribly wrong with his proportions. He is too tall, too slender. His arms and legs and fingers are thin and elongated to such an extent it evokes arachnid rather than human. His head and hands are the only parts of him not tight-wrapped in black cloth. His flesh is pale and translucent, and its substance flickers. Each subliminal quiver of flesh exposes a brief radiographic ghost of his hand-bones and skull.

‘Better?’ he asks.

It is not.

‘M-much,’ says Sindermann.

Ahriman nods, the ghost of his skull visible through his spectral skin. ‘Be so kind as to place your weapon on the table.’

This last remark he has uttered without looking away from the archivist, but it is directed at Mauer. The moment the intruder’s armour retracted and vanished, her hand began to creep towards her holstered sidearm.

‘On the table,’ he repeats, still grimace-smiling at the archivist and not looking at Mauer. His intonation is odd.

Mauer takes out her sidearm, and places it on the reading table. Then she stares at it, as if she has no idea how it got there.

‘Now,’ says Ahriman, ‘what should I examine next?’

‘Next?’ asks Sindermann.

‘I am already engrossed in a hundred texts, Kyril Sindermann,’ Ahriman says, ‘but there are so many to peruse. Let us be thorough before the despoilers arrive.’

He clasps his hands, and interlaces his long, bony fingers in a grotesque knot. All around him, on every shelf, the books of the collection begin to

stir. They begin to throb, to breathe, their covers and spines expanding and contracting like consumptive lungs. Dark liquid begins to dribble out of them and drip onto the library floor. It’s ink, but it smells like blood. Glossy black puddles begin to spread at the foot of each stack.

Ahriman squeezes his knitted fingers together more tightly. Things begin to appear in the pools of ink, spidery golden script drifting like burning threads across the surface of each expanding puddle.

The sorcerer squats, hands clutched to his chest, his spindly knees above his hunched shoulders, and he begins his study.

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7:xxi

A mission to undertake

Icaro leads Hassan to a nearby station, and commands the operator to establish a link. It takes a moment, and the signal quality is poor. As he takes a headset, Hassan hears the sizzle and wheeze of the immaterium behind the voice at the other end.

‘Moriana,’ he says. He utters the phonetic sigil that confirms his identity, and Mouhausen does the same. ‘Inform Lord Vulkan that Ollanius Persson and his companions have escaped custody.’

It seems a matter of little consequence, in the light of the disaster engulfing them.

‘They are probably dead,’ he adds.

‘The Unspoken Sanction has been initiated,’ she replies. *‘Sigil was proving insufficient.’* She doesn’t elaborate. Hassan is well aware of the sequence of crisis options that must have led to that decision.

‘Is the Regent still in control of Throne function?’ he asks.

‘At this time,’ she replies.

He tries not to think about his master’s suffering. Pain, grief, loss… There’s no time for such things.

‘An anomaly has been detected–’ she begins.

‘I’ve been apprised,’ he replies. ‘No data forthcoming.’

‘Khalid,’ she says, her voice faint, and coming and going through static, *‘Lord Vulkan has commanded that efforts be made to locate the prisoner Fo and his weapon project.’*

‘If he still lives,’ says Hassan.

‘I’m going myself,’ she says. *‘I have been allocated six Hetaeron Companions and–’*

‘No,’ says Hassan. ‘Stay put. Do nothing to weaken defensive numbers in the adytum.’

‘But–’

Hassan glances around. There’s little he can do here. The War Court, and all tactical considerations, are close to the limit of viability.

‘I’ll do it,’ he says. *It was my task to begin with. It was given to me. If I can do nothing else, I’ll complete the job my master handed to me in the jumble of his last wishes*. ‘I’ll do it,’ he repeats. ‘Stay where you are, and transmit to me any details you have regarding Fo, his protection detail, or Xanthus. Last known location, last sighting, anything you have. Tell Lord Vulkan the matter is in hand.’

‘Lord Vulkan wants Fo brought to the Throne Room, if he’s alive.’

‘I understand.’

‘And his weapon–’

‘I understand.’

He cuts the link.

‘I have a mission to undertake,’ he tells Sidozie.

‘You’re leaving?’ asks Icaro. ‘Chosen One, please understand that no guarantee can be made for your safety once you leave the Rotunda cordon.’

‘Mistress, very little guarantee can be made for my safety *within* the cordon,’ Hassan replies.

‘He will not be going alone,’ says Ios Raja. Bare-headed, and most of his auramite plate above the waist shredded, he looks defiant. He still has his guardian spear. He looks like some bloodied cyberzerker from the Unification Era. At Raja’s side, the two Sisters – Aphone Ire, Vigil Commander of the Raptor Guard, and Srinika Ridhi, Knight-Centura of the Clouded Leopard Cadre – wait like phantoms.

‘I’m sure we can spare some battle-brothers from the cordon,’ Sidozie says

to Icaro. ‘A couple at least.’

She nods. ‘See to it.’

As Sidozie strides away towards the main hatch, Icaro turns to Hassan. He is checking the slate of data Mouhausen has sent him.

‘You were a soldier, I believe?’ she asks. ‘Before your calling?’

‘Yes,’ he replies.

‘Then you’ll know how to use this,’ she says.

She hands him the Komag. For a second, she seems reluctant to let it go.

‘If I need it here,’ she says, ‘then it probably won’t make a difference. I fled the fall of one war court. There’s nowhere left to go if this one is lost.’

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7:xxii

On Tilted Rock

Corswain swings the grapple like a mace, and buries one claw in the Death Guard's faceplate. He hooks the man backwards, and he topples, already dead, off the rock. But the grapple is wedged fast and Corswain has to let go or be pulled over after it.

He turns, and finds himself facing a brute with a warhammer, the traitor who knocked Bruktas down. Corswain jerks backwards to avoid the whooping head of the hammer as it sails past him. He almost trips over Cypher's unmoving body.

Billowing cinders fly up in the rain. Bolt-rounds scorch past. Tragan and a gun-shield squad have finally reached *Tilted Rock* and are ascending the slope to support them. Two carry flamers, probably the last functioning flame-weapons in Corswain's division. They rake the edges of the promontory, burning Death Guard and scaling ropes off the rim. Blazing figures fall into the blackness of the pass below, the burning snakes of ignited ropes whipping between them.

The Death Guard with the warhammer is still on his feet. Corswain can see that the traitor knows his position is untenable, that the escalade has failed,

and that his fate is sealed. But he can also see that the bastard-brother of Typhus intends to fight on. The blood of Corswain, Hound of Caliban, will be rich payment for their efforts, and for their losses.

The traitor hefts his hammer, rain pelting off his armour. He has a foliated skull, a glaring death's head, embossed in cloisonne across his breastplate. He roars a cachectic challenge, bathing Corswain in the carious stink of his exhalation, and comes at the seneschal, hammer raised. Corswain puts his head down and meets the charge with a charge of his own, driving in under the two-handed strike, slamming his left shoulder into the foe's belly. The Death Guard almost doubles up, folded around Corswain's bullish thrust. The warhammer clatters from his hands. Corswain's sword has lunged in with him, low and straight, and impaled the traitor through the gut.

They crash to the ground together at the very tip of the rock. Corswain untangles himself, and gets up off the spreadeagled corpse. He draws his sword out of rancid flesh, buffeted by the wind. The rock is slippery with rain and the noxious fluids leaking out of the enemy's plate. A hand steadies the Hound of Caliban, ensuring that he doesn't plunge from the edge.

It's Bruktas, battered and smeared with gore, lending his only hand to his lord. Corswain embraces his brother, a brief, tight clasp.

'I'll not forget this courage,' he whispers.

'You'll have better things to remember, lord,' mumbles Bruktas.

Tragan and his men have reached them. The flamers stab a last few howling gouts of deterrence down the cliff face.

'Get this man to the Apothecaries,' Corswain yells to Tragan over the gale. 'Get his wound rebound.'

He goes to Cypher as Bruktas is led away.

Cypher is alive, but barely conscious. For a moment, Corswain thinks to remove the legendary mask to check for life signs or injuries. But he can't bring himself to break that trust.

'A favour returned,' Cypher croaks. He grasps Corswain's forearm and tries to sit up.

'I saw you fall…' Corswain says.

'A moment of pain, a moment of…' Cypher trails off, as if unwilling to explain. 'It passes. Help me up.'

Corswain hauls the warrior to his feet in the driving downpour, and

steadies him.

‘Come,’ says Cypher. ‘Come with me.’

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7:xxiii

This time forever

At her station, Ilya Ravallion finally establishes a link to the space port. After the blurt of authenticating code, Shiban Khan's voice comes on almost at once.

She starts to explain her proposal. He cuts her off immediately.

'Lion's Gate is shutting down all links,' he says. *'Traitor scrapcode has infested the port systems. Nothing can be depended on. We are closing all links permanently to block any chance of transmitting scrapcode infection to other locations.'*

The link goes dead. No word of farewell, no last, personal remark, though she knows he knew it was her. Another White Scars leave-taking done without sentimentality, though this time, she feels, it's forever.

Everything, spoken or unspoken, is now a goodbye.

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7:xxiv

Where they fall

The main bridge is a twilit ruin. The lights are on low power or out altogether. Spars and sections of ceiling have collapsed across the railed upper platform and down into the serf pits and steersman stations below. A faint, sporadic flicker of displays shows that some systems are still functional, but the rest are dead, and there's no one present.

Not even corpses.

Abaddon fans his men out to secure the chamber. They crunch over broken plastek, shards of glass, and dead leaves. Wet black mould and wretched, fuzzy fungal growth covers most of the stations. The black slime looks like it has been projectile vomited from helpless mouths. He can hear it dripping onto the deck.

'What in the name of hell happened here?' asks Captain Jeraddon.

Abaddon tries not to imagine. The command chamber looks like that of a rotting hulk that has been lost between stars for ten centuries. Saprophytic tendrils drape the walls, and envelop the guard rails and deck grilles like vines. Some, wet and colubrine, have bloomed, unfolding xenos flowers that gape like haematic sores. Whispers and murmured secrets chirm in the

shadows and corners of the chamber like clustered swarms of insects.

He ascends to the main platform. How many times has he stood here, in briefing or command? He barely recognises it. Part of the upper railing over the steersman pit has been bent out of shape by some impact. Debris has fallen over the strategium table. He clears it aside, and tries to activate the device. It refuses, twice, then blinks on at half-power. Something has cracked the projection plate. He enters his command override code, and the table displays the runes for ‘no signal’.

‘Help me,’ he growls, and his equerry hurries to him. Ulnok has some skill with technical systems. He dumps the data buffers and tries a reload.

‘Palace Dominions,’ says Abaddon. ‘Tactical.’

Nothing resolves on the plate. Hololithics flutter and fade.

‘The ship, then,’ says Abaddon. ‘Internal schematics, overview, system status.’

Ulnok nods, and enters a series of data codes. An image slowly forms on the tabula topographica, planes and panels of light unfolding like origami. It’s not the ship, except it is. Abaddon stares at it, deciphering what he’s seeing. He can trace the immense structure of the flagship, the layering of its decks, the thready power signature of its titanic drives. But the whole thing is laced into something else, something larger, as though one three-dimensional schematic is being displayed across another.

‘Clean that up,’ he says.

‘My lord, I–’

‘Get rid of the ghost imaging.’

‘It’s… it’s not ghost imaging,’ says Ulnok.

It’s a city. The diagrammatic views of ship and city are fused through each other, as cleanly and completely as the emporium was fused through the service-way wall. He peers more closely. There is a third overlay. He can see details of the Imperial Palace in the mosaic of data. He can see Lion’s Gate. There, the Eternity Gate and the Ultimate Wall. He can see Auguston Bastion, where he was standing just hours before.

Was it hours?

He leans forward and checks the orbital-position graphics. The *Vengeful Spirit* is not orbital. It is not anything. The ship, the Palace, Terra, and every other nightmarish figment of a location that this display is showing, are all occupying the same locus. And that locus has absolutely no realspace

coordinates or position-mapping data.

He steps back. He feels pity and fear for his father. Pity and fear, and something less coherent that feels like abhorrence.

‘My lord?’

His equerry has picked something up from the deck beneath the strategium table. Cards. Liquid-crystal tarot wafers. Ulnok brushes the dirt off them and holds them out to his captain.

‘Are these important?’ he asks.

Abaddon knocks them out of his hand with a sudden flash of regret and disgust.

‘Don’t touch them!’ he snaps.

Ulnok steps back in alarm.

‘Those are not our instruments,’ Abaddon growls. ‘Those are not… We don’t use things like that. We don’t… we don’t have any dealings with that nonsense. We’re soldiers, Ulnok. *Soldiers*.’

‘Of course, yes, my lord.’

Abaddon looks back at the table display. Some of the cards Ulnok offered him have fallen across the cracked plate, their shapes visible through the tiers of hololithic data. *The Shatter’d World*, *The Labyrinthine Path*, *The Hulk*, *The Martyr*, *The Monster*, *The Lightning Tower*, and *The Emperor. The Dark King.*

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7:xxv

Rex Tenebris

‘I wonder–’ Mauer starts to say, then stops as she realises no one can hear her. The pitch-black library space seems to be getting tighter and smaller, the shadows vicing in around them. Speaking at a normal volume, her voice seems small and distant, the words muffled and faint, as though the air is too sparse to bear their weight.

‘I wonder,’ she says, making an effort to raise her voice so it will carry, ‘that even those sworn to the Warmaster’s cause are now hiding from him in fear.’

‘A bold statement,’ says Ahriman, without looking up from the books spread out in front of him.

‘But true, though, isn’t it?’ Mauer asks.

Now the sorcerer looks up. She finds she cannot bear the attention of those piercing blue eyes, and looks away.

‘The Imperium is sundered into two, unreconcilable factions,’ he says. ‘Neither one of them suits the interests of the Thousand Sons entirely well. Both are, in contrasting ways, a bad fit. But our allegiance was decided for us. Your Emperor will have no part of us, and considers us outcasts and

heretics, despite–’

He hesitates. His voice has suddenly sharpened, as though he is suppressing some infinite, righteous anger.

‘No matter,’ he says, clearing his throat. ‘He has shunned our support and our loyalty, condemned us for activities he bred into us, and has refused to aid us in our state of gravest need. Your Emperor made us traitors, so as traitors we are obliged to stand.’

‘You could have stood aside,’ says Mauer.

‘There is no room for neutrality,’ Ahriman replies. ‘Sides must be taken at a time like this. The Warmaster’s cause is not one we are sworn to, as you put it. It is one we are obliged to take by default. There are some benefits. Lupercal at least tolerates our nature. Until now, certainly. His ambitions and our own have become divergent, hence my visit here, to secure some measure of security for our destiny.’

‘You are afraid of him, then?’ asks Mauer.

‘Horus Lupercal has become the manifest instrument of Chaos,’ says Ahriman, ‘the most powerful in the history of our reality. Everyone should be afraid of him.’

‘But in this future he’s bringing with him,’ says Sindermann, ‘you’ll seek neutrality then?’ He gestures to the books spread out on the reading table, bleeding their ink-blood onto the floor. ‘You’ll use magic, and arcane learning, to divest yourself of any allegiance to your Dark King?’

‘What do you mean?’ asks Ahriman.

‘I mean carve out some small parcel of this abominable future for yourselves, independent from–’

‘No,’ says Ahriman. He rises to his feet, staring at Sindermann. His grimace tightens, exposing more of his clenched teeth and black gums, the twilight composing him eddying like incense smoke. ‘That name. What do you mean by it, remembrancer?’

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7:xxvi

A survivor

As his eyes fix on that last card, the pullulating whispers in the shadows around him seem to say the card's name.

'Abaddon!'

He turns at the sound of Sycar's voice. Hellas has found something in one of the peripteral cloisters that surround the command platform. Abaddon approaches.

It's a man. It's an Astartes. He's hunched behind one of the pillars, curled up like an animal trying to hide. Abaddon thinks the man's dead at first, but he's not. He's cowering. Frozen.

Abaddon crouches down.

'Hell's teeth,' he whispers. 'Argonis?'

Kinor Argonis trembles at the sound of his name. His plate, even his flesh, is covered in slimy, atramental mould, like the surface of the bridge stations. There's a massive wound across the side of his face, as though he has taken a glancing blow from a maul. The wound is still bleeding.

'Kinor? Kinor, it's Ezekyle. Kinor, wake up.'

Argonis, equerry to the Warmaster, slowly turns his head to look at

Abaddon. There is no real recognition in his eyes, but there is fear. Abaddon has never seen true fear expressed in the eyes of an Astartes battle-brother.

‘Kinor, what happened?’

Argonis’ lips bubble, incoherent. He’s panting, whimpering quietly.

‘Argonis,’ Abaddon says. He places his hands on the equerry’s shoulders and tries to straighten him up to make eye contact. ‘Argonis? It’s me. It’s the First Captain. Speak. Where is Lupercal?’

‘Lupercal!’ Argonis snorts, like it’s a curse, or a bark of pain.

‘Yes, Kinor. Lupercal. Where is he? I need to find him. Where is he?’

‘Heeeeeeee…’ Argonis shudders, holding onto each vowel-sound as though it’s the only way he can keep his voice alive. ‘Heeee waas… heeeeee…’

‘Kinor!’

‘H-h-heee was here…’ Argonis gasps, sucking in a breath between each syllable. He convulses, and bile spills out of his mouth and down the front of his plate. ‘He was! He was! He was! He–’

‘Calm, brother. Get a grip on yourself. Where did he go?’

‘He was,’ gurgles Argonis, ‘*terrible*.’

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7:xxvii

You’re Ollanius Persson

They spend another while searching for signs of Katt or Actae without success. Then John’s laboured breathing and coughing becomes too much, so slowly, reluctantly, they limp out of the enveloping dust that hangs across the ruins like fog.

Beyond, perhaps a kilometre or so distant, they find clearer air. Behind them, the site of their miserable last stand looks like the aftermath of a thermobaric bomb: the radius of debris, the huge split in the ancient wall, the lingering pall of dirt.

They stop in some yard or marketplace. It’s part of the old city, the insidiously ancient one, with grotesque stone buildings and broken hovels on all sides. At one end, some kind of golden gate, instantiated from the Palace, stands covered in dead ivy and unhealthy vines. One corner of the yard appears to be a bunker from the Palatine Zone. Behind the mouldering rooftops, a turret-battery from the hull of the traitor’s flagship rises like a giant wing. Everything is covered in moss and decay.

But the air is brighter. Somewhere, behind the dank cloud-cover, a hard white sun is burning.

John and Oll rest. Leetu prowls the area, restless.

John lies on his back on an uneven curb, his breathing slow and ragged. Oll sits, toying with the depleted ball of twine.

The long companions are dead because of him, victims of his ambition more than of the monster Erebus. He fights back tears. He had affected quiet modesty, but he had secretly begun to believe that he would finish his quest, and bring them all through alive.

Where the hell did that delusion come from? The fact that he's a Perpetual? His personal connection to the Master of Mankind? Erda's inexplicable faith in him? Her thread was certainly part of it: the uncanny knots leading them on, implying some guiding providence looking out for them, and suggesting that, somehow, they had *already* succeeded. They made it all the way to the Throne Room, for god's sake. They did what Horus Lupercal could not.

His friends have paid the price for his confidence, the confidence that accretes during a life that lasts too long.

He stares down at his pitifully worn boots.

His delusion was his own past; the fact that he's done this before. Other odysseys, other quests, other longshots that miraculously overcame the odds. This venture would be a myth, for in myths, the weak, the outnumbered, the mere mortals, they always prevailed.

He should have remembered that myths never feel like myths at the time. You only realise you've been part of one long after it's over. At the time, nothing is certain, and the chances of triumph are slim. The world is vicious, and life isn't a story. It doesn't get a satisfying ending just because that's how bards make stories end.

The long companions, those close friends he never really knew, they trusted him. They believed Oll knew what he was doing. But he didn't. He hasn't simply failed. He was never going to succeed in the first place.

'Shit,' Oll murmurs to himself, 'I'm worse than Him.'

John stirs beside him and sits up. His eyes, dark-rimmed with pain, stare at Oll questioningly over the dirty edge of the bandages.

Oll shakes his head. He's not going to explain. The belated humility is too painful to articulate. To presume he was significant enough to *achieve* something on this scale, and change the fate of a species: it makes the Emperor's bloated aspirations seem modest. The Emperor, at least, has

power behind His convictions.

John's hand moves, signing.

We should push on.

'No. Oh, no,' says Oll, almost laughing. 'We're done now, John. For real.'

You can't give up.

'I can. It's the least I can do.'

You have faith–

'Don't. You were right. It was worthless after all. So was this.' Oll holds up all that remains of the ball of twine. 'When these threads started to appear, I thought it was vindication. Our future selves had triumphed, and we were simply catching up. If this was Erda's plan, it's broken and gone.'

Oll sighs and looks at John.

'Sorry,' he says.

For what?

'You believed in me. You thought I could achieve something. I just couldn't deliver.'

You still can.

'No, John.'

You're Ollanius Persson.

There are no hand-signs for 'Ollanius Persson' in hortcode. John has to spell the name out phonetically. It takes a long time, and that makes it seem more poignant.

'The thread's snapped, John. The knife's broken. I've got most of us killed. They trusted me, John. I failed. Over and over again, almost every step of the way. I've blundered from one disaster to another. We're done.'

The hand begins to painstakingly spell again.

You're O-L-L-A–

'Stop it. I know who I am, and who I am is not enough.'

How many times did you take a wrong turn?

'What?'

All those years ago. In that place.

'That was different.'

This is just another labyrinth. We've taken some bad turns. The worst. But it's a labyrinth. There's still a way through it.

Leetu walks up to them.

'There's something out there,' he says.

‘What?’
‘Movement. Things moving in the streets nearby.’
‘What things?’ Oll asks. John gets up.
Leetu shakes his head.
‘I don’t know,’ he says, ‘but we would do well to get out of the open.’

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7:xxviii

Close your eyes

Abaddon pulls back from Argonis. Something… *Impossibly*, something has overridden the equerry's Astartesian fear-control conditioning.

'Kinor?'

'He is… He became something… He became… I didn't want to see. He made me see. He made me look. I didn't want to. Ezekyle, I didn't. I didn't want to look.'

He starts to weep. It would be pathetic if it wasn't so chilling.

'Rest,' says Abaddon. 'Take a rest for a moment. Clear your head. Close your eyes.'

Argonis shakes his head wildly. 'No!' he gasps. 'If I close my eyes… *I'll see him!*'

Abaddon stands up. He calls to First Company's Apothecary.

'Give him a shot.'

'Of what, First Captain?'

'Tranq him. Anti-psychotics. Something. Get him coherent.'

The Apothecary selects phials from his pack and leans in.

'Sycar,' Abaddon calls out, turning away. 'I want access to the Lupercal

Court.’

‘The hatchway’s locked,’ Sycar reports. ‘Priority securement–’

‘Blow the damn doors,’ says Abaddon.

Sycar doesn’t argue. He annihilates the lock mechanisms with directional charges, and then two of his hulking Justaerin Terminators, Gustus and Varia, drag the hatches aside, their power claws scoring the metal.

An algid wind blows in at them, brandishing rain. There is no room or chamber on the other side of the bridge, no Lupercal Court or command annex.

There is outside.

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7:xxix

MM226

They help John up, and start to make their way out of the square. There's a street, a narrow, cobbled route strewn with shadows and overhung by decaying tiled roofs. Another street, broader and more open, joins it from the right, a street from the Palatine Zone bisecting a decrepit alley of the Inevitable City. Oll steers them on. The dark, shadowy route offers better protection from prying eyes.

But John tugs at his sleeve, and gestures towards the turning on the right. The Palatine street, scarred by war, rises away from them on a low gradient. A string of heavy wagons have been abandoned by the roadside.

'Stay here,' Oll says, and leaves them in the shadows of a sunken stone turret that leans wearily, draped in a cloak of ivy.

He makes his way up the street towards the wagons. Ropes and yoke chains are draped beneath them. The light is spare and flat, like a grey afternoon at sea. The street was part of the Palace. He can see that from the architecture. Windows have been blown out from shock damage, and the ground is covered with meltglass. There's other litter too, things that look like lost belongings. A worn shoe. A broken lantern. A buckle. Scraps of

rags. A child’s rattle. A few strips of paper scudding the breeze that look like the parchment tags one might fix with a wax seal.

He feels as though he’s being watched. He senses eyes behind the empty windows. He looks around, but there’s no sign of anyone, even though, from the evidence littering the pavement, there were once many people here. The street has been so perfectly stolen from its original location by the endemic, exoplanar commingling, it even has its street sign, screwed to a wall near the corner. *Glacis Street*. Who lived on Glacis Street, he wonders. Who walked here? Who died here?

The abandoned wagons are mismatched and heavy. They are covered with tarpaulins and have the serial *MM226* crudely stencilled on their side panels. *If I remember Munitorum code abbreviation correctly,* Oll thinks, *that’s a munition manufactory code.*

He climbs the spokes of a wheel, and pulls back the tarp on the first one. He sees magazines packed into simple raw-wood crates. Behind them, crude pallet frames support khaki rockets machined for shoulder launchers.

Oll looks back down the slope of the street, and beckons eagerly to the others. John and Leetu start moving to join him. He jumps off the spokes and hurries to the next wagon. It’s full of oblong packing boxes crudely nailed together. They look like miniature coffins, pauper coffins for those who can afford nothing more. He levers off a lid. Inside, packed in shredded plastek, are reconditioned lasrifles. Mars-pattern Mk II. He pulls one out, and brushes off the packing chips. It’s an antique, old and scuffed, but it’s been cleaned and the mechanism refurbished. He snaps off the plastek ties around the trigger and the receiver. It feels so familiar in his hands. It’s just like the one he used to have, back in another life, the one before last.

‘What have you found?’ asks Leetu.

‘Guns,’ says Oll. ‘Enough f–’ He corrects himself. ‘Plenty.’

He nearly said ‘enough for all of us’. The irony bites. They were weaponless for so long, and now they have more than they can carry.

He checks the weapon, then loads it with a powercell. There are bandoliers in one of the wagons, so he takes two and fills the loops with additional power mags, then straps them across his body. There are no blades, no bayonets, no handguns, no grenades, no launchers for the rockets. There are no scopes either, but Oll was always an iron sights man. Oll sees John take a bandolier, and a short-pattern Mk IIc with a folding wire stock. He has no

idea how John’s going to manage it with one hand.

Leetu sorts through the wagons too. Everything is made for human hands, and even the largest firearms, Mk IIs and a few Mk Is, seem like toys in his hands. The overall size isn’t the issue: Leetu can clutch a Mk II to his body like a compact or a carbine, but his armoured fingers are simply too large for the trigger guard, and the trigger guard is pressed steel and an integral part of the construction moulding. It can’t be bent or snapped off. Leetu sets to work with an axle pin and a lump of curbstone, trying to hammer the guard out of shape without breaking the firing mechanism.

It’s not going to work, Oll thinks. Maybe if they had steel-cutters or an angle grinder. Leetu’s efforts crack the magazine well of the weapon. He tosses it aside, selects another, and tries again.

+Persson.+

Oll’s rifle comes up to his cheek in an instant. Hyper-alert, he pans the street. Someone said his name. It wasn’t the wind. It wasn’t his imagination.

Someone called his name.

John and Leetu have both noticed his reaction. They get up, looking around.

‘Something,’ Oll whispers.

+Persson.+

Oll adjusts his aim.

‘Either of you hear that?’ he hisses, weapon steady.

‘No,’ says Leetu.

John shakes his head.

As I thought, thinks Oll. It’s in my head. Telepathic. And the tone is familiar. It’s thin and muffled, by distance, or pain, but I know it.

‘Actae?’ Oll says. John and Leetu look at him sharply.

+Persson. Get. Get out of there.+

‘You’re alive? Where are you?’

+Under. Under the wall.+

It’s definitely pain vicing her voice. Excruciating pain. Every thought-syllable, every utterance, is a superhuman effort. Oll lowers his weapon quickly and turns to John and the proto-Space Marine.

‘Actae’s alive,’ he says. ‘We’ve got to go back–’

+No.+

He winces. Her voice was more pain than word.

+Buried. I’m buried. Tonnes of stone. Crushed. I’m finished.+

‘We’re not going to leave you!’ Oll exclaims to empty air.

+No! Leave me. Get out of there. I can see. I can see you. I can see what’s coming. Run.+

‘Actae–’

+Run!+

Oll looks helplessly at his companions. Then he hears gunshots.

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7:xxx

Boneyard of cities

There’s space. Open space. A tenebrous landscape, wasting away beneath an unconstellated sky. Cliffs of splintered rock and colossal debris rake into the heavens as though an entire continent has suffered the same orthogonal compression as the dim and musty yard he clambered through to reach the command bridge. Vast shelves of rock, a thousand metres high, have been uplifted by some titanic orogeny, and their horizontals turned into verticals like the folds of a cloak. Abaddon can see the ruins of ancient, upflung cities clinging to the crests of some like barnacles, torn from the earth far below.

In the far distance, low in the sky, there’s a light source, a sun or a star. It’s obscured by the wind-driven clouds, but it’s fiercely bright because its white glare penetrates the undercast. Abaddon has seen the pitiless depths of dead stars and black holes in his many voyages, and this looks like one in negative; a baleful pit of white light, like a pupilless eye, its gravity tormenting the grey clouds and clotted warpflux into a murky spiral.

It is uncomfortable to behold directly, so he looks away.

Immediately in front of the open hatch is a trace of ruined street, where

most of the archaic structures have been pummelled into rubble. Abaddon sees the craters of artillery shells half-full of rainwater. Alien weeds sway in the gusting wind. Small fires sputter and burn amid the strewn rubble. The ruined street is part of a ruined city, a city of ancient and unknown provenance, and that wasteland of urban war stretches away as far as he can see. The ruinous buildings clinging to the upthrust cliffs far above are parts of it, chunks torn out and elevated by the sudden mountains.

Abaddon feels as though it is not so much a city as a boneyard where cities come to die. It is a cinerous place of decay, but it has been here a long time. Some of the more prominent structures and stonework still standing have been worked by the labour of wind into strange, angled ventifacts. But the traces of damage and violence are recent.

Is his father here? Did he do this?

Abaddon calls out his father's name, but his voice merely echoes back, oddly modulated by the smoothed surfaces of the petrifacts and worn stone. Phaeto Zeletsis leads the first squad out, with Abaddon close behind.

They're less than ten metres from the hatch when they start to take fire. It's small-arms at first, then some las and bolter rounds.

Their attackers move into view, making no attempt at concealment or cover. They come scrambling and stumbling over the rubble slopes and debris, howling manically, clearly insane, or terrified, or both. There are thousands of them, and they are fleeing from something.

They are Excertus of the Hort Lupercali, and they are Word Bearers. They are the support divisions and crew of the *Vengeful Spirit*.

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7:xxxi

The old soldier self

Hard rounds ping off the pavement and wall. A couple of las-bolts zip past. Figures have appeared at the end of the street, close to where he left Leetu and John waiting. They're soldiers. Excertus. Hort Lupercali.

They're running up the slope towards them, firing wildly. They look deranged. There's no combat discipline at all. They're either mad with panic or out of their heads on battle-stimms.

Oll rolls up onto one knee in the lee of a wagon, and starts to return fire. He drops one, two, then a third, snapping each one off his feet with a single, body-mass shot. He's calm, methodical, allowing his old self, his old soldier self, to take over, flooding him with years of experience and muscle memory. He takes a fourth shot, a fifth. Both find their targets.

But there are more Hort Lupercali appearing. The first were just the outliers of what seems to be a whole brigade in rapid, disordered retreat. Oll can't tell if he and his companions are under attack, or simply in their path. He rises, and gets a better angle, rifle braced across the top of the wagon siding. Gunfire smacks into the wagon. He maintains his calm, surgical rate of fire.

Beside him, John opens up. He doesn’t have Oll’s experience, nor his accomplished precision, and even if he did, he can’t handle his weapon properly. John opens fire from the hip on full-auto, the weight of his carbine slackly braced by the crook of his injured arm. His wildfire rips down the street. Most of it goes wide or throws up grit from the ground. He hits one of the Lupercali in the knee, and knocks him flat.

+Run!+

Oll shakes the anguished, pain-crushed voice off. They can’t. If they leave the cover of the wagons–

A second blurt of las-fire rips out from their position, alongside John’s extravagant and desperate discharge. Leetu has a Mk II pulled tight to his chestplate. He hasn’t been able to lever the trigger guard away, so he’s jammed the axle pin through the guard loop and is tugging it like a lever to depress the trigger. It is far from accurate, and the pin keeps slipping, causing his bursts of automatic fire to stutter out.

+Persson. Run!+

Oll looks around. The buildings nearby, maybe–

‘Run!’

He’s about to curse at Actae when he realises the command didn’t come from her. It was Leetu.

Three Word Bearers have appeared, striding up the street among the advancing Lupercali.

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7:xxxii

Even if it costs us all our lives

Corswain follows the limping figure down *Tilted Rock* and along the upper terraces to the mountain's tertiary portal. The wind tears at their soaked cloaks and surcoats.

'A spear of pain,' Cypher shouts as he walks. 'The distress of our Librarian brothers. I'm surprised you did not feel it.'

'I did not,' yells back Corswain.

They enter the mouth of the portal, and are at once spared the storm's assault.

'It took away my senses,' says Cypher.

'What did it signify?' Corswain asks.

Tanderion is waiting for them in the portal's rock-cut tunnel. He is bare-headed, his face pale and drawn.

'What say you?' asks Cypher.

'My lords,' says Tanderion, with a break in his voice. He looks bewildered by shock. 'Our efforts–'

'Speak, man,' says Cypher. 'Where are the others?'

'Below, my lord. Below still, at work. But the sorcery of that witch-

blooded devil–’

‘You mean Typhus?’ asks Corswain sharply.

Tanderion nods. ‘The warp is in him, lord, and it magnifies him. We… we cannot conceive of his power. He found a way in–’

‘Typhus?’ Corswain snarls.

‘His *will*, my lord. The force of his will. It is seeping in. It undid and destroyed much of the work we had completed. Cartheus was nearly killed, and Asradael badly burned by psykanic discharge. We are trying to restore the damage. But he knows, my lord. Typhus *knows*. He knows what we are trying to achieve. This assault is no longer about revenge. He intends to stop us. He intends to see that this beacon is never lit.’

‘How much is left to be done?’ Cypher asks.

‘We are almost obliged to start over, lord,’ says Tanderion in near despair.

‘What does that mean?’ asks Corswain. ‘How long?’

‘It may be impossible, lord seneschal,’ says Tanderion.

‘Nothing is impossible,’ Cypher snaps. The mask turns to regard Corswain. ‘Hours, Hound of Caliban,’ he says. ‘Perhaps more hours than we have left. I will need to supervise the work directly to see it accomplished.’

‘You have such skill and knowledge?’ Corswain asks, then raises a hand and stops himself with a shake of his head. It is not his place, nor the place of any of the First, to ask Cypher about the secrets he embodies.

‘I will do what I can,’ says Cypher. ‘We will hasten to prepare various acroamatical devices, some diabolifuge to ward off our enemy’s malison. This time, perhaps, we can keep the corrosive touch of Typhus out of the Librarius’ endeavours.’

Corswain nods. He takes a deep breath.

‘You will have to be the figurehead, my lord,’ says Cypher. ‘It is clear I cannot be in two places.’

‘Do what you must,’ replies Corswain. ‘The mountain is still our priority, even if it costs us all our lives. Make its light visible.’

He turns, sword drawn, and starts to retrace his steps up the tunnel to the portal mouth. Outside, in the storm, the wordless roar of war has resumed, speaking of renewed assault.

Over his shoulder, he tells them, ‘I’ll win you as many hours as I can.’

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7:xxxiii

The last stand of Erda’s warrior

Oll curses. Astartes. Traitor Astartes. They can’t fight that. Reconditioned lasrifles don’t have anything like enough stopping power.

Two of the Word Bearers have mauls, the other a broadsword. They are moving quickly, shoving the Excertus aside. Oll had forgotten how horribly fast those huge, plated warriors could move. All three are howling, berserk. He can see insanity in their eyes. Like the Excertus around them, they look like they are running, in terror, *from* something. But even if they’re fleeing, they clearly intend to kill anything that gets in their way.

Still firing as best he can, Leetu repeats his command to run as a roar.

They’ve got seconds. Oll takes one last shot, then grabs John, and starts to drag him up the slope. John tries to shake Oll off, but he knows the position is hopeless. They have to run. They’ve got to let Leetu buy them time to get clear.

They scramble along the pavement, stray rounds chipping the flagstones and nicking the wall beside them.

Leetu stands his ground. A hard round pings off a pauldron, another off a vambrace. He destroys a charging Excertus soldier with a burst of fire, but

the axle pin slips. He adjusts it, pulls again, and mows down two more. Then the gun misfires. The refurbed magazines from the wagon are either too old to hold power, or they're only partially recharged.

There's no time to change mags because it's too fiddly with hands his size. Leetu swings around instead, using the gun as a cudgel, and smacks an Excertus off his feet. He clubs another down. They're mobbing him, throwing themselves at him in fear-driven madness.

What could be so terrible these men would rather attack a plated Astartes legionary?

There's no time to consider it. The first of the Word Bearers is almost on him. Leetu demolishes the skull of a Lupercali soldier with the sledge of a paw, then puts his back into a swing, both hands on the barrel of the rifle.

The improvised club meets the Word Bearer in the side of the head, jolting him into a stagger. The brute tries to swing his maul, but Leetu brings the rifle down again into the tattooed face. The hardwood stock splinters, and pieces of the firing mechanism spin away. The Word Bearer stumbles backwards, blinded by the blood pouring into his eyes.

The second Word Bearer, a spiked hulk of the Black Comet Chapter, crashes into Leetu, driving his maul into his ribs. Leetu is hurled backwards, bouncing off the side of the nearest wagon. He tries to steady himself. The Word Bearer brings the maul down again. Leetu dodges aside, and the blow caves in the wagon's siding.

Leetu backs up. He's unarmed. The second and third Word Bearers close in, weapons raised. The first, blood striping his face, is close behind him. Four more of them have appeared, approaching rapidly. The Excertus are all around him, baying like dogs.

The Word Bearer with the broadsword, a veteran of the Ebon Branch Chapter, pushes past the Black Comet, and takes a swing. Leetu evades, and pushes in, trying to close the distance so he can grapple to rob the sword of its length advantage. They grind together, locking, trying to lever each other's limbs. The Word Bearer shakes him off, and thrusts. The blade goes clean through Leetu's ribs.

He sways, leaking blood, then lurches as the blade withdraws from his body. He staggers away, trying to master the pain, trying to recompose. He manages to dodge the next swoop of the blade, but backs away too far. The Black Comet Word Bearer is right behind him, raising his maul to strike.

There’s nothing he can do. It’s over.

The blow never lands. Leetu hears a clang of metal, something hitting the ground. He hears a growl of dismay from the traitors all around.

He turns.

Another Astartes has joined the fight, out of nowhere. His plate is as plain and mark-less as Leetu’s, but where Leetu’s is silver, this warrior’s armour is a greenish grey. He has two swords, one in each fist.

He swings one, a crackling force-blade, and decapitates the Black Comet, then engages the Ebon Branch with the broadsword in a flurry of strokes. The Excertus jerk aside to avoid the scything blades.

The Astartes drives the Word Bearer back. Four more of Lorgar’s demented sons are closing in.

Loken turns and, in one fluid gesture, tosses *Mourn-It-All* to Leetu. Despite the shearing pain in his side, Leetu catches it in mid-air.

There’s no time for words. Back to back, the two Astartes turn their blades on the gathering sons of Lorgar Aurelian.

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7:xxxiv

Not why I told you to run

Oll half-drags John up the dusty steps of some large, derelict building, and kicks open the heavy doors. It's cold, quiet and dim inside, a spacious hall. Every step sets off a dozen echoes. The ceilings are high, supported by pillars. A firelight glow throbs through the tall, dirty windows.

Oll sets John to rest by the base of a pillar and returns to the doorway, rifle ready. He peers into the street outside. A few maddened Excertus rush past, but they're simply fleeing, weeping, gabbling, any meaningful pursuit of John and Oll forgotten.

Oll pushes the doors to. He looks around. There's no way of telling what this place was, or even where it's from. The Palace, he guesses. The gloom is multicoloured, thanks to the glassaic panels of the windows. There's a huge oeil-de-boeuf window at the far end, showing the stations of some Imperial institution. Oll has no idea why the windows are lit by the flicker of firelight when nothing outside was on fire.

'Actae?'

There's no answer.

'Actae?'

+Stay hidden, Ollanius.+

‘Tell me where you are, Actae. We’ll come back. We’ll get you.’

+I’m dying, Ollanius. Don’t. Don’t even think about coming back. Coming back for me. I’m buried. The wall.+

‘Is Katt…’ Oll begins. ‘Is Katt with you? We couldn’t find either of you after…’

She doesn’t reply.

‘Actae?’

+Do you have the knife? I see. I see you do. Is it broken?+

‘Yes.’

+You must go on anyway. Let John. Let John rest for a moment, then go on.+

‘Leetu–’

+Forget him. You have to. You have to keep moving.+

‘To where? We’re lost. The thread is broken.’

+I’ll try to. Try to guide you. You have to. To go on. Keep moving. Keep running.+

Her voice is hard to hear. Oll assumes that its anguished tone is a product of the agony drenching it, but there’s compassion in it, an urgent concern he’s never heard her articulate before.

‘We ran, Actae,’ he says. ‘You warned that the traitors were coming–’

+Lorgar’s sons were not. Were not why I told you to run.+

‘Actae? Actae?’

Her pain has become too much. Only silence answers him.

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7:xxxv

Cold and unsaid

‘The Dark King?’ asks Sindermann. He frowns. ‘We understood that’s what his name would be. A prophesied name of the god to come–’

‘I know what it is,’ says Ahriman. ‘It is a name that has lain cold and unsaid for a long time.’

‘It is… everywhere,’ says Sindermann. ‘Every book we opened seemed to contain the name–’

‘And it has been reported to us,’ says Mauer timidly, ‘that the name is being spoken among the ranks of the traitors, and uttered by Neverborn blasphemies.’

‘Have you not heard it yourself?’ Sindermann asks.

‘I have not been listening,’ says Ahriman. ‘Just as I cannot see the future, I have stopped listening to the present. For one such as me, Kyril Sindermann, the warp has become too deafening. I have shut it out, so as not to be driven from my wits as I complete my work. If the name is being spoken, then its time is here…’

‘It seems to hold significance for you,’ says Mauer.

‘It does,’ Ahriman replies. ‘If Horus Lupercal is truly the Dark King

ascendant, then his power will be even greater than I dreaded. I feared he would become godlike, a being so mighty that it was effectively and functionally a god. But if he is anointed as the Dark King, then he is truly a god indeed. A divinity, an omnipotent being.'

'And how is that any different?' asks Sindermann.

'The four principals of Chaos have invested their power and influence in Horus,' says Ahriman. 'They have blessed him with unrivalled strength so that, to you or me, he would seem a god. But he is an instrument, a slave to their darkness. However, if he has become, or is becoming, the Dark King, then they have rashly permitted his full apotheosis. He is ascendant in his own right.'

He looks at the three of them so sharply, they start back in fear.

'Show me the works where the name appeared,' he says.

Mauer flinches. There are books everywhere, piling the floor, spilling from the stacks, like piles of limp, dead birds leaking ink onto the ground.

'W-we'll never find them again,' she says.

'Then I will look in your minds,' the sorcerer says, 'and see them as you remember them.'

His blue eyes flash, lighting up the skull under his skin. Sindermann, Mauer and the archivist all shudder suddenly as a cold touch settles on them, knifing the length of their spines and hardening the soft, living tissue of their brains into permafrost. They cannot keep him out of their heads.

'I see,' Ahriman hisses. One by one, wounded volumes and manuscripts start to slide across the floor towards his feet, slithering free of the sticky piles of book-corpses and puddles of ink. They crawl like insects that have been stamped on, but are still alive. The first of them begin to rise, dripping, up the legs of the reading desk.

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7:xxxvi

Brothers in arms

Leetu rams his borrowed blade through the skull of a Word Bearer. At his back, his new ally finishes the last of Lorgar's sons with a demolishing blow from his force-blade.

Leetu turns, clutching the wound in his side.

'We must get off the street,' the other Astartes tells him. 'There will be more.'

'Agreed,' says Leetu. The pain of his wound is acute and hard to quell. The Astartes steps forward and lends an arm to support him.

'My thanks,' Leetu says, 'for your intervention.'

'We clearly share the same enemies, brother,' the other says.

'There were two men with me,' Leetu tells him through gritted teeth. 'We need to find them, brother. They need protection.'

The other nods.

'Who are you?' asks Leetu.

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7:xxxvii

Dead, she lives

Dead, she lives. Such is the Perpetual curse.

When the wall collapsed, she could not save herself, nor the girl at her side, for she had put every shred of her psychic power into stopping the Dark Apostle Erebus.

Actae has built her own grave. Broken rock buries her, and beneath it, she is broken too. She can feel the extent of her injuries, and knows most would be fatal to any mortal form.

But she is Perpetual.

She lies in the darkness of her blindness, but even if her eyes could see, all would still be suffocating black. Many tonnes of stone compress her. Masonry blocks crush her. Everything is dust. The girl is close by. Actae can feel the last heat bleeding out of her body. A fierce soul, to the end. Actae almost admires her. But she has endured the pain of the girl's death along with her own, because their minds were leashed together.

Two deaths. She has suffered two. How many more?

The pain, like her, is forever.

She marshals what's left of her mind, and tries to lift the rubble pressing

down on her. She has nothing like enough telekine strength. All her efforts achieve is a brief shiver of the stone slabs, which causes more dust to cascade into the cavities around her face and throat. She chokes and dies.

Dead, she lives.

When she was reborn from the husk of Cyrene Valantion, she thought Perpetuality would be a blessing. She would use it to change the stars and shape the future. But no. The truth is, sometimes, immortal is the last thing you want to be.

Mortal, she would be dead, and free of this pain.

Immortal, she will lie in this agony forever, entombed.

In the blackness, her mind can see little. She cannot see the Dark Apostle. She presumes, and hopes, that Erebus is crushed dead nearby in the rubble. That would be something, at least. A small consolation.

She tries to move. Everything is pinned, and every bone is fractured. She is just able to shift her shoulder. A rock – over a tonne of wall-stone – slides and crushes her skull.

Dead, she lives.

It will take time, she realises. A day. A week. A year. Ten years. If she lies still, her form will slowly heal, cell by cell, until at last, her restored mind will be strong enough to cast the rocks aside. She must be patient. She must endure the agony, in stillness, and silence, for however long it takes.

Except time is not passing. The warp has settled un-time on the world. There is no time in which she can heal.

Her ailing mind, half-blind and weak, has seen the city beyond the dust that shrouds her tomb. She has seen, briefly, the entangled dimensions, the cities inside cities. She has seen the oceans of the empyrean washing Terra away. She has seen, and felt, the terror afflicting everyone, even the traitors who engineered this fate. She has seen the Word Bearers fleeing in mortal dread through the timeless streets, unable to grasp that which they have helped bring to life. She has seen the gleeful Neverborn recoil in fear. She has seen veteran Excertus of the Hort Lupercali die of shock where they stand from the very sight of it.

There is no time, and the Dark King is here.

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7:xxxviii

A reading

The sorcerer’s long, claw-like fingers sift and paw through the injured books. His pallid flesh is wet with ink. Ahriman is urgent, engrossed.

Sindermann, Mauer and the archivist watch fearfully, enclosed by the tightening gloom. It looks like Ahriman is performing some grisly autopsy on the seeping volumes.

‘What…’ Sindermann whispers, ‘what are you learning?’

‘Too much, Kyril Sindermann,’ Ahriman rasps without looking up. ‘Not enough.’

He raises his hands, dripping with ink-gore, and sets his ghastly stare upon them.

‘Prophecy has been deluded,’ he says. ‘All that has been pre-written and foreseen is twisted into a new meaning.’

‘By… Horus?’ Sindermann asks.

‘Indirectly,’ the sorcerer replies. ‘By his deeds, by his actions, by the calamity. What was ordained by fate has been derailed.’

A soft growl issues from his throat. His bones throb beneath his flesh.

‘The history of our universe is already decided,’ he says. ‘It is already

written. But that history presumes that the universe will continue along its course without interruption or unnatural distortion.’

‘M-meaning?’ asks Mauer.

‘Meaning, that natural flow has stopped. A caesura. Time has halted, and thus everything that the natural flow of time would have brought about is thwarted. The Dark King was prophesied. But, without time, the prophecy has fallen sideways. It has become misaligned.’

‘That… that doesn’t make sense,’ says Mauer, trembling.

‘To you, perhaps,’ Ahriman replies. ‘Your mind is not enlightened. You throw a stone, knowing with some confidence where it will land. But if time stops, that stone will land somewhere else, not where you intended and certainly not where you predicted. It will miss its target, and hit another. So too with prophecy. Accurate prediction relies on the sustained continuity of conditions. Change those conditions, in this case, the physical laws of reality, and the veracity of the prediction alters.’

‘Or… or simply becomes invalid,’ says Sindermann.

‘No, sadly. The thing begun will still occur. But the result will be completely different. In a time without time, a prophecy fulfilled will not effect the same outcome. Its outcome could not have been foreseen by anybody observing under, or assuming, the previous conditions.’

He sweeps the dead books off the reading table with a sudden brush of his forearm. The action is so abrupt, they all step back in fear. The discarded books splatter on the floor beside the table like slices of raw meat.

Ahriman reaches into the black bandages swathing his elongated body, and draws out a small mother-of-pearl casket. It opens itself. He takes out of it a deck of tarot cards.

‘I must reread the now in terms of the new conditions,’ he says.

The cards shuffle themselves in the air between his open hands. He takes them, and begins to lay them out on the table. He begins to turn them face up.

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7:xxxix

Weft and warp

‘I am Garviel Loken,’ the Astartes says.

‘I am Ollanius Persson.’

Oll lowers his rifle. Leetu has followed the newcomer into the derelict hall. The proto-Astartes has been wounded. To Oll, Leetu’s grievous wound looks deep enough to be mortal.

‘He’s one of us,’ says Leetu through gritted teeth.

‘I’m one of nothing,’ says Loken.

‘I mean he stands on the side of order,’ says Leetu, ‘against the darkness.’ He props himself against the end of a pew to relieve his injury.

‘There are no sides,’ says Oll. ‘Just mankind.’

‘True enough,’ says Loken. He studies the two men: the wary old soldier with silver in his hair, and the pitifully injured man, his face wrapped in dirty rags, who sits beside him in the pews. He looks around at the pillars, and the oeil-de-boeuf window.

‘This building,’ he says. ‘This is the Scholaster Hall on the Via Aquila.’

‘No longer on that street or in that place,’ says Oll.

‘Nowhere is where it is supposed to be,’ says Loken.

‘You are aware of the shifting reality, then?’

‘Yes. I boarded the *Vengeful Spirit* some time ago,’ Loken says. ‘From my perspective, I have not left it. Yet here we are. You?’

‘I opened the wrong door in the Palace of Terra,’ says Oll. ‘Or perhaps the right one. You seem, forgive me, quite sanguine about the derangement of the material world.’

‘Meaning?’

‘The Archenemy seem to have lost their minds,’ says Leetu. ‘Those Excertus soldiers. The sons of Aurelian. We broke them, friend, because they were mad with fear.’

‘Then the whole world is mad,’ says Loken. ‘For this collapse is everywhere.’

‘But not you?’ asks Oll.

‘I have seen enough,’ says Loken. ‘Perhaps too much. I am past madness.’

He doesn’t want to say more. It is an ongoing struggle to contain the torment of the truth the daemon revealed to him. It seethes in his mind, and he knows it will never let him go.

He unclamps his helm and removes it. His face is solemn, slightly freckled, unshaven. His eyes are cold grey.

‘The same question might be asked of you,’ he remarks.

‘We have seen a good deal too,’ says Oll. ‘Why did you come to our aid? Don’t think us ungrateful.’

‘You were fighting traitors,’ Loken replies. ‘I could not let you do that alone.’

He hesitates.

‘Besides,’ he adds, ‘I believe everyone and everything I have encountered so far, I have encountered for a reason.’

‘Why would you believe that?’ asks Oll.

‘It is a matter of certain signs,’ says Loken. ‘Sigils. Hints. The sense of a higher power at work. I cannot explain it convincingly.’

‘Try,’ says Leetu. He has sat down to try to ease his wound.

‘Destiny, perhaps?’ says Loken. ‘Fate? Almost everything we hold dear is lost, but I feel that some tiny chance of salvation remains, and that whatever sentient power persists on our side, however feeble, it is willing us to seize that chance. Willing me, at least. I have been set on a path. I think I was set on it years ago. I am coming full circle. This place, for example. I have

been here before. I was brought here before.’

‘Why?’ asks Oll.

‘So that it would have significance for me?’ Loken suggests. ‘Another sigil of meaning. That when I saw it again, I would know it. That, perhaps, it would establish the significance of those I met there.’

‘Us?’

‘You are far from ordinary,’ says Loken. He looks at Oll. ‘You have the smell of eternity about you.’

Oll laughs. ‘Why would you say that?’

‘Because I have been shown it by the Neverborn, and you look like it. And you…’ He looks at Leetu. ‘You are not of any Legion I know,’ he says.

‘I am not of any Legion,’ says Leetu.

‘Well, then,’ says Loken.

With a wince, Leetu flips *Mourn-It-All* in his hand, and offers it, hilt first, to Loken.

‘Keep it, for now,’ says Loken. ‘We will need it. The fight is not done.’

‘Mine might be,’ Leetu replies. He tries to regulate his breathing. Blood hasn’t stopped running out of him since he entered the hall.

John’s hand moves in code.

‘Ask me why yourself,’ says Loken.

John’s eyes gleam in surprise between the ribbons of his bandages. He raises his dirty hand and signs hortcode directly to Loken.

‘Why did I board the *Vengeful Spirit*? Because I am hunting for the Warmaster.’

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7:xl

The last configuration

He has killed a thousand daemons in the darkness.

Alone, one step at a time, he has found his way through the pitch blackness, and cut down everything, every half-seen, misshapen form that lunges at him from the shadows, until the blade *Encarmine* smoulders in his hand.

Sanguinius sees by the flickering light of that blade. He sees, in part, in fitful shadow, the ruins of the vengeful ship, the mighty ship, whose wounds and damage will never be avenged. He sees the draping cables hanging in slack loops from the ruptured ceiling, the severed ends hissing and spitting weak sparks of power. He sees the crumpled deck plates, torn loose, rivets sheared, scattered across the underdeck frame like a hand of cards tossed aside in pique. He feels the irregular and uneven pools of artificial gravity they generate, spaces of lightness, spaces where his bones feel leaden. He sees the tortured bulkheads, slabs of adamantine and steel as thick as palace walls, bulging and deformed by the ministry of unimaginable forces. He sees the darting yellow eyes of the Neverborn lurking in the swathing shadows.

He hears the darkness growl.

It is mere minutes since Ferrus Manus said farewell, leaving him to travel the last part of the way alone. But time has snapped completely, like a fraying thread, and those minutes have been the length of years and the shape of centuries. He has killed a thousand daemons in the darkness.

He smells smoke. He smells the stale reek of a fire gone out, and the stink of the charnel house. Nidor. Burned flesh. Boiled blood. The cold odours of a thrice-damned rite, a savage offering at the altar of a butcher-god, or merely the grisly residue of slaughter.

He is alert. He has never been so focused. The sword in his hand quivers, ready to move, to strike at the slightest provocation. He has killed a thousand daemons in the darkness, one for every step of the way. He has seen few of them clearly, for the blackness is a midnight around him. They have just been shapes, teeth, nameless forms that have sprung at him, and been sliced away, smashed back into the shadow that spawned them.

But he has tasted their fear. Every single one has been afraid. Frantic. Desperate. The stench of terror is everywhere.

They know who he is. They know what he has come to do. They have no wish to risk their new flesh in an effort to stop him, but stop him they must. He is Sanguinius, the Bright Angel. He is everything they are not. He threatens everything they seek to be.

Another step, groping his way by the guttering light of his blade. Another, the shadows jumping and sliding. Another step, and he comes to the first of the skulls.

One or two at first. Human skulls, burned and cracked, jawless, littering the broken deck like loose stones on a mountain path. Then more, then more, beginning to heap and pile like rubble. A carpet of skulls, that crack and dry-splinter under his feet, a slope of skulls, that scatter and tumble as he ascends, a mound of skulls.

He claws his way up the loose and moving mass. He sees a light above, a crepuscular glow.

The skulls, heaped up in such quantity he cannot bear to estimate a number, form a long, steep ramp that leads to the jagged end of the next deck level. Lamps burn, emergency lamps in wire cages, casting a harsh, blue light.

The intense glare is ultraviolet, surgically intense. Sanguinius can hear a

fierce, high-pitched hum at the edge of the audible threshold. Emergency lighting and decontam systems. The diseased ship is trying to rid itself of infection.

He steps up from the skull-slope onto the deck plates. The walls breathe. It is ghostly moon-bright in the hallway, like being outdoors in the smog-pall on the toxic spoil heaps of Cthonia, or the blighted wastes of Baal. Light, almost sickly pale, strobes slightly, flickering through leaves swayed by the wind. Or something like leaves. He ignores such trickery. He can hear whispering again, like dead leaves skittering in the breeze or shushing under foot. Like the dry wing-cases of beetles. Like whirring moths–

What is it they are whispering? He can almost make out the words.

The name.

One name, uttered and repeated.

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7:xli

Duty and faith

Slowly, with some difficulty, John gets to his feet. He signs again, clearly, so that Oll and Leetu can read it.

I remember names, words. Garviel Loken was a captain of the Luna Wolves.

Oll and Leetu look at Loken.

‘I still am a captain of the Luna Wolves,’ says Loken, ‘it’s just that there are no Luna Wolves left. My father is Horus Lupercal.’

‘What will you do when you find him?’ asks Oll.

‘If he is still my father, I will beg him to relent and abandon the path he is following. If he is not, and I suspect he is not, I will avenge the brothers I have lost to his will.’

‘And you are… guided to do this?’ Leetu asks.

‘I have tried to explain,’ says Loken. He gestures towards John. ‘This man cannot speak. Infirmity prevents him. But he makes signs, and communicates that way instead. So too, the one who guides me. He can speak no longer, but he makes what signs he can.’

‘The Sigillite?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is he with you now?’ asks Oll.

‘I cannot say. He has been silent for a while.’

‘So you serve the Emperor?’ asks Oll.

‘I serve His will, yes.’

The blind loyalty of the Astartes, John signs.

‘No,’ says Loken. ‘A conscious choice. At this hour, there is no other cause for a sane man to rally to. Or even one, like me, who has crossed the line of sanity.’

He unsheathes Rubio’s blade, and shows it to Oll.

‘A force-blade,’ he says. ‘It should be dead in my hands, for I have no gifts. I was tested throughout my upbringing. But power flows through it when I wield it. That power is not mine.’

‘I saw as much in the street,’ admits Leetu.

Oll takes a step forward and looks up at Loken.

‘I’m a Perpetual,’ he says. ‘You know what that is?’

‘Yes.’

‘The smell of eternity indeed. I am kin to the Sigillite, and a comrade of the Emperor’s in ages past. I have come a long, long way to find Him.’

‘To help Him?’

‘That’s one way of putting it.’

‘You intend to confront Him as I intend to confront my father.’

Oll smiles. ‘Very perceptive. You, Loken, are the closest I have got to either of them. You are a vessel. A vessel of the Emperor’s power, perhaps, or one chosen by the Sigillite. Either way, standing here, I am suddenly closer to the end of my journey than ever before. I would speak with Him, or with His intermediary, the Sigillite. To speak to either is to speak to both. Can you help me do that?’

Loken frowns.

‘Are you my purpose, Ollanius Persson?’ he asks. ‘The path I was set on, the path you were following? Were they meant to cross here?’

‘I am prepared to place some faith in that idea,’ says Oll.

Behind him, John gurgles a mocking snort.

‘What’s amusing?’ asks Loken.

‘Ignore my friend,’ says Oll. ‘He has no time for the metaphysical. But I do, and I think you do, too. In fact, I think we have had similar experiences.

Long and difficult journeys, guided by dubious signs and imprecise symbols, the full truth withheld from us, even the purpose of our journeys, but we've kept going anyway. You, I think, through duty. Me, through faith. An abiding sense of purpose.'

'Is there anything we can do?' Loken asks.

'The greatest powers in the universe are colliding,' says Oll. 'Mankind is helpless. The greatest armies are paralysed. In my experience, under such circumstances, it is the least of us who can do the most. Those small or weak or insignificant can move freely, because they don't seem to matter and are beneath contempt. Like specks of dust, we can move around the feet of gods, and they will pay us no heed. I need to speak to the Emperor. I think you can get me to Him.'

'I don't know how,' says Loken.

Whatever we do, we should get out of here, John signs.

'John's right,' says Oll. 'We were warned that a great danger was approaching.'

'The traitors clearly sense it,' says Leetu. 'They are all fleeing in fear.'

'The Dark King,' says Loken.

'So you've heard that too? Yes, your father, empowered. We have to avoid him, and reach the Emperor first.'

'You say signs have led you this far?' Loken asks.

'Yes, like you,' says Oll. He chuckles sadly, and reaches into his pocket. He shows the ball of twine to Loken. 'This, if you can believe it. We followed a thread.'

'Then do so again,' says Loken.

'It broke. It's no longer a path. It's just a ball of…'

He stops abruptly.

'What?' Leetu asks.

'Something Graft said,' Oll replies. 'About fence wire.'

What are you on about now? John signs.

'Fence wire?' says Leetu.

'When we rested earlier, he asked about the crate, and he said… he said, "A wire is just a wire until it's strung out along fence posts, but it is always a fence".'

Oll grins.

'It's always a fence,' he says.

Have you gone mad? John signs.

‘I share Grammaticus’ frustration,’ says Leetu, holding pain at bay in his voice. ‘You are not making sense.’

Oll gazes down at the ball of thread.

‘This is the map,’ he says. ‘Take it. We’re in a labyrinth, and this is the way through. It’s all wound up, but it’s still the route. Fence wire is still a fence before it’s rolled out and pegged up. This is the map, the whole map, right here. This is the way we have to go.’

‘I don’t understand,’ says Loken.

‘You don’t have to,’ Oll replies.

Mystified, they all stare at him. It’s always that way with labyrinths. Those who followed Oll long ago were the same. A labyrinth is a designed experience, a puzzle. It asks you questions and the answers are hard to grasp. There’s a reason the words ‘maze’ and ‘amaze’ come from the same root.

‘This is the map,’ he says again, as though repeating it will make it easier to understand. ‘We had it all the time. We’re not lost.’

Except, maybe they are.

The glow of fire behind the great oeil-de-boeuf window suddenly increases in brilliance, as though in response to a ritual transaction. The light changes, flaring from flickering yellow to a fierce white. They hear a mounting rumble, like the start of a landslide. The ground shakes. Panes of glassaic in the window crack and fall in. Fissures begin to split the marble floor.

The window blows in in a dazzling cloud. The wall disintegrates like a curtain in a flash-fire. Stumbling backwards, they turn from the lethal glare.

The Dark King, in all his terror, is upon them.

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7:xlii

Black star

From her grave, she has seen Persson, and Erda’s warrior, and the mutilated Grammaticus, the only surviving members of the long companions. Their spirit and hope is annihilated, their cause lost. Out of something, perhaps the kindness that Persson chided her about, she tried to warn them, to urge them to flee, to at least save themselves. But her wounded mind was too weak to sustain her voice for long, and now she is helpless and mute.

She can see the Dark King. He is here now, and upon the world. It is impossible not to see him, even with a mind as damaged and blinded as hers, for his consuming darkness is as bright and ferocious as a black star. He is everywhere and everything, fusing and burning everything around him with the scorching radiance of his power.

Such a thing. In her wildest visions, she could never have imagined such a creature. The universe is not big enough to contain him. The cardinal powers of Chaos are but ghosts in his shadow, and the almighty warp obeys his voice, helpless in his tidal pull.

Terrible. Beautiful. Inconceivable. Unimaginable. The Dark King is here, and every atom of the universe will be changed.

She tries to see him, to behold him as he approaches. One glimpse destroys her. Awe kills her like a lightning bolt.

Dead, she lives.

She will not look again. She cannot. She closes her mind and submits to the dust and darkness and pain.

She saw, for one instant, what he was. Everything has indeed changed. Everything they thought was wrong. Every assumption was false. Ruin has triumphed indeed, more deeply and more completely than their worst imaginings.

The Dark King is here, and he is not what they thought he was at all.

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7:xliii

My brother

Sanguinius.

He takes another step. Ahead, the severed corridor ends in a doorway.

Brother.

The doorway stands open. Its frame is woven from scrimshawed human bone. He steps through it, and finds himself in a narrow tunnel. It is barely wide enough for him to move along it, the sheer black walls tight on either hand. He looks up, and sees that the walls rise higher and higher above him. It’s no tunnel. It’s a slender crevasse, a long, narrow fissure split between towering cliffs. He starts to advance. Again, the whispers.

Sanguinius.

The floor is wet, black rock, and is utterly flat, as though it has been smoothed by centuries of passage. Indeed, it almost feels as if this slight pathway has been worn down through the cliffs by aeons of repeated, single-file procession, uncountable feet making the same lone journey he is making, gradually eroding this seam. Impossibly high above him, he can see the sky, a narrow river of night sky and stars beyond the clifftops that mirrors the path he treads. After thirty metres, the crevasse starts to taper.

The walls become even closer, constricting him. He can see a vertical line of pale light far ahead. He is forced to turn sideways and edge his way along to fit.

It is claustrophobic, despite the endless space above his head. He advances. The cliff walls compress his furled wings, and scrape against his breastplate. The walls are so near to his face, he can see they are made of bone; human long-bones, woven together like reed-work. They are wet and stained, glossy with black oil.

After another few sideways steps, he is obliged to squeeze his way, crushed by the fissure even side-on. It begins to feel as though it will taper so much he won't be able to squeeze any further. It begins to feel as though it will wedge him tight, and pin him forever.

He slides on, shuffling his sidestep, edging towards the light, scraping his wings and plate.

At last, he steps free into the open beyond.

The Lupercal Court is a vast space of fluted columns, with arches springing from the imposts to create a soaring, ribbed ceiling. The floor is polished stone. The scale of the Court is immense and humbling, an architecture designed to create an artificial infinite. Sanguinius is just one tiny mote of gold and white in an impossible, soaring cathedral of obsidian and black marble. Such a chamber could not and should not exist on the *Vengeful Spirit*.

The light here, viscous and heavy, is a dull, crimson glow.

Welcome, brother. At last.

He thinks, for a moment, that the room itself has spoken. But part of it moves. Part of the stupendous, gothic grandeur turns to look upon him.

Horus Lupercal smiles.

Sanguinius' breath catches in his throat. His brother's metanoia is difficult to believe. Horus is the most forbidding thing, a monolith of auramite-edged black plate. The power bestowed upon him seems to magnify his physical presence like some foul and fantastic creature of myth. He is clad in the Serpent's Scales, the artificed Cataphractii wargear hand-crafted for him. He looms like a bestial demigod bred to fight the titanomachy that raged before the first sun was lit.

The Warmaster's right hand is a world-cracking claw; his left casually clutches a mace the size of a young oak that could hammer heaven open.

The pelt of a wolf, one so big its jaws could swallow the moon, drapes across his shoulders like dirty snow across Alpine peaks. The alphabets of Chaos inscribe his gold-and-ebon armour, throbbing with eldritch heat. A single eye adorns his steep, thick-plated torso, unblinking, gazing with poisonous regard. Power drips from him like water, spilling from the edges of his plate, and from the pipes and cables that sustain him and connect him to his armour as one living whole. It splashes and fizzles on the ground around his feet in cascades of voltaic sparks and incandescent rage.

His head, red-lit, is framed by the oversized gorget, collar and gird-work of his mantle-plating. Tubes and fibre bundles plug his shaven scalp and drape across his cranium like braids of hair.

His face. Even in the cast of the blood-light, his face is the face Sanguinius remembers. His smile is the smile Sanguinius loved.

‘Brother,’ Horus says. Each syllable burdens the air, making it shudder to bear the weight. ‘My brother. My dear brother. I waited for you for so long. You have come, as I hoped you would. I have missed you.’

‘You hoped I would come?’ asks Sanguinius. His words, strong and clear, sound thin and insubstantial after the crushed-mass density of Horus’ voice. ‘You knew I would come.’

‘You were ever your own soul, dear brother,’ Lupercal replies. ‘I could not trust in fate, or destiny, or even chance, to bring you here. It had to be your choice. My heart is full that this is the choice you made.’

‘And my heart is full to see you again,’ Sanguinius replies. ‘Despite all that has taken place, I have mourned the loss of my brother Horus. I would not have let this monstrous war end without seeing you, with my own eyes, one last time.’

‘Monstrous it is,’ Horus murmurs, ‘and end it must. I abhor it, and wish it to be finished. But, my brother, this does not have to be the last time we stand face to face.’

‘I think it must,’ says Sanguinius.

‘Why so?’

‘You are not the brother I remember. You are changed. The warp is upon you, Horus, and I fight terror just to look upon you.’

‘No need! Oh, my brother, no need for fear! The warp is indeed upon me, and within me, because all things change. You must know this, you of all people. You have seen it. You know it. In that, we are alike.’

Lupercal pauses, the echo of his last words rolling away to the edges of the chamber like discarded thunder.

‘We always have been,’ he says.

Slowly, he raises his left fist, and points the head of the huge mace towards the five gigantic thrones set against the towering rear wall of the Court.

‘One is for you,’ he says. ‘There will be a coronation. I have dreamed of this. Join me.’

‘It’s too late, brother,’ Sanguinius replies.

‘Nothing is too late,’ says Horus. ‘I decide what is and is not, and even time obeys me. Make a wise choice, my dear brother. I have longed for your company.’

‘This is your offer?’

‘This is my offer. Please accept it. It is why I have waited for you. It is why I have chosen to meet with you.’

He raises his right hand. The scythe-talons of his power claw gently beckon.

‘Join me.’

Sanguinius turns his left side towards his brother. He bows his head, eyes closed, for a second, and when he raises it again, the blade *Encarmine* comes up with it into a raised proffer above his right shoulder. He opens his eyes, and meets Horus’ gaze, unblinking.

‘And this is why I have chosen to meet with you,’ he answers.

‘To… fight me?’

‘To end you.’

‘But you will die,’ says Horus.

‘Everyone dies, brother,’ Sanguinius replies.

‘Not me. This is your decision?’

‘Yes,’ says Sanguinius.

Horus stares at him. A single tear wells from his eye and trickles down his cheek.

‘Pity,’ he says.

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7:xliv

Fate confounded

They watch the read, fascinated despite their fear. *The Harlequin* of discordia, *The Eye, The Great Hoste, The Shatter'd World, The Labyrinthine Path, The Throne* reversed, *The Hulk, The Moon, The Martyr, The Monster, The Lightning Tower*, and *The Emperor.* Ahriman turns the last. *The Dark King.*

Sindermann, Mauer and the archivist flinch back a step as the cards turn. The designs, though identifiable, are not those commonly known. *The Hulk* shows an image that is surely the *Vengeful Spirit*. *The Lightning Tower* shows a figure crushed by falling walls that Sindermann can't help but feel is Rogal Dorn. *The Labyrinthine Path* portrays an old soldier, some Excertus veteran by the look of it, with grey in his hair. Unseen by him, a monstrous horned shadow awaits behind the next turn of the maze as he approaches. *The Moon* reveals Garviel Loken in its pale glow, *The Throne* depicts the Sigillite, seated in majesty and wracked in agonies, *The Martyr* shows a winged angel, a demi-Icarus falling from the sky, *The Eye* the old emblem of the Eye of Terra flown during the crusade, and *The Monste*r is an unspeakable rendition of Lupercal. *The Shatter'd World* is clearly Terra,

and in the ghostly faces of the multitudes thronging *The Great Hoste*, Sindermann sees his own features, along with Mauer's and the archivist's and, it seems, every other soul he has ever known.

Ahriman seems equally perturbed. These, it seems, are not the designs of his cards as he knew them.

'All is lost,' he murmurs. Sindermann is appalled to see true fear in Ahriman's eyes. 'The Dark King is not the apotheosis of Horus Lupercal.'

The sorcerer points a bony finger at the last two cards, *The Emperor* and *The Dark King*. They are identical.

'Fate is confounded,' Ahriman says. 'Your Emperor is the Dark King.'

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PART EIGHT

THE DEATH

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8:i

Angel, executioner

Words exhausted, only deeds remain.

Sanguinius keeps his pose, sword raised, hand extended, as implacable as the golden effigies that fill the endless hallways of his father’s Palace. His gaze is equally unwavering. He holds and returns his brother’s stare. He does not blink, though to look into the eyes of Horus is to look into plunging chasms of night. There is nothing there, no pity, no hope, no mercy, not even the hint of intellect. The tear on Horus’ cheek seems an anomaly, for there is no evidence of the emotion that produced it. The Lupercal’s eyes are fathomless black, the dead eyes of an apex predator rising silently from the ocean’s depth with jaws agape, or watching from savannah scrub about to pounce. The look alone transfixes, for, like the mightiest carnivore hunters, the flat regard is as much a weapon as talons. What teeth do to flesh, these eyes do to the psyche.

Sanguinius is not transfixed. Fear fills him to the top of the throat, enough to make him retch, but he holds his pose to declare his defiance. It is a warning.

Horus Lupercal does not heed it. His eyes remain dead, unblemished by

the glint of sentience. He makes the first move, a single step forwards, as slow and ineluctable as tectonic drift. He lets the shaft of the great maul in his left hand slip down a little way until he is gripping it by the ferrule for maximum leverage.

A second step. The infinite architecture of the Lupercal Court shivers at the tread.

And Sanguinius is no longer still.

His legs flex as his great wings unfold, an act that takes less time than a blink. He is aloft, a golden blur that sweeps upwards, then down and across the black-scaled mass of his monstrous brother. His sword's first strike tears across Lupercal's chest plating in a ripple of distorting shield energy; his second lashes Lupercal's left pauldron as he skims across it; his third rakes Lupercal's shoulders and back in a spray of sparks.

Horus reacts. The maul rises and swings to swat his brother out of the air. The force of the swing is so great, there is a sawing crack of air displacement. Despite its thunderclap, the maul finds nothing. Sanguinius has banked full circle, and *Encarmine* rips Lupercal's right hip, and then again, full force, into the breast-guard.

The Talon of Horus rakes and snaps with enough force to crush the hull of a tank. The maul swings, bruising the air with the crimson trail of the blood-light fizzing from its head. Neither connects. Sanguinius, wings scything, is inside his brother's guard again, face to face, six metres off the deck, driving sword-strokes into his chest and face… *One! Two! Three!* Each strike deflects from reactive power shielding, each strike makes Lupercal's shield generators howl as they struggle to maintain protective integrity, each strike causes the shimmering ghost of the defensive field to quiver and coruscate across his plastron and carapace.

The talons of the lightning claw close again, the slam of a bear-trap. Sanguinius is already gone, soaring vertically, like a launching missile, high into the air above his brother. Under the arching ribs of the lofty ceiling, he turns, inverts and dives, a descending eagle.

Impact. *Encarmine* strikes the raised shoulder plating that houses the suit's reactor. Sparks gout. More than sparks… Superheated specks of armour plate and hammerscale. There is a raw-metal gouge left in the hunched back plate of the Serpent's Scales.

The mace-head rips the air. Sanguinius is beneath it, rolling into an

unloaded extension that carries him away parallel to the deck less than two metres up. He banks around a column, and sweeps back into strike range at an oblique angle, climbing slightly to eye level, then diving at the last to deliver a passing strike into Lupercal's left thigh. He loops hard behind his brother's back, and lands a second blow to the reactor plating, driving *Encarmine* two-handed. The Talon clashes at him. He evades, but does not pull back. They are face to face again, for a millisecond, enough time for *Encarmine* to slash the gorget and crackling face-shielding.

The mace descends. Its strikes not brother but floor, crazing the deck like a bullet-hole in a mirror, cracks spidering out from the molten point of impact.

Horus Lupercal, despite his greater bulk, is not slow. His every step, movement, swing and strike is bullet-fast, the lethal blink of a las-bolt. Faster than any Astartesian reaction, faster than any Custodes reflex, faster than any primarch.

Except one. Sanguinius is making him seem ponderous, heavy and cumbersome. Sanguinius is so fleet, he is a golden ray of light, a darting glimmer. He is outmatched on almost every level, so he draws on what advantages he holds: speed, agility, a peerless blade, immeasurable courage and, above all else, flight. He forces the conflict into three dimensions, using the air and the space, rejecting the constraints of flat-plane combat. To stay on his feet, on the deck, and square off against his brother like two Astartes in a practice cage would be to invite a duel he cannot win.

It is an eagle against a bear. A raven on a wolf. A bull-dancer vaulting an auroch. Lightning around a mountain. Dazzle in darkness. He is relentless; circling, swooping, climbing, stooping, coming at his brother from every angle to deliver a savage blow, before rolling and banking out of death's reach.

He wheels, feinting right to evade the Talon, dragging the full length of *Encarmine*'s edge across Horus' right pauldron with a grating squeal. Embers flutter. Broken scales rain onto the deck. Horus brings the maul round in a cataclysmic swing that almost catches the beating wings as they pass him. Sanguinius darts away, then swoops back, suspending like a hummingbird for long enough to gouge his blade into Horus' waist, then veers away as the maul comes at him.

The maul's head strikes the floor again, this time with enough force to split

and scatter the flagstones in a long fault line that exposes the underdeck spars. The tumbling slabs and buckling deck plates chase after Sanguinius like an opening crevasse.

Sanguinius loops and lands, square and true on his feet, just beyond the end of the long fracture in the floor. He looks back at his brother along the line of broken, displaced and jumbled flagstones twenty metres away.

He turns his left side towards Horus. He raises the blade *Encarmine* in a proffer above his right shoulder. He extends his left hand, ready. He meets Horus' gaze, unblinking.

'You *lack*, brother,' he says.

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8:ii

A Dark-crown’d King

What are they? Sparks? Snowflakes? White blossom? Smuts of fine ash? Oll Persson can’t tell. He can’t see, because everything is so bright. A whiteout. Radiant white air, blindingly harsh, in which white particles seem to be drifting.

It’s also cold. Very cold. The cold is a system-shock, clasping his bones, chilling his soul, and numbing his mind.

A blizzard, that’s it. A killing blizzard, just blown up out of nothing, trapping them there on the mountainside. Northern Thrace. Yes, it must be. They were crossing the ridge, a risky decision, and the weather closed in, burning their vision out with its glare, icing them to the bare rock. His companions had cried out imprecations to Chione, daughter of Boreas, goddess of winter snow, pleading for her mercy–

No. This isn’t Northern Thrace. He knows that much. That was lifetimes ago. This is ash, white ash. This is Krasentine Ridge, and the ion bombs have just detonated beyond the horizon, and the ash flakes engulfing them are cremated organics carried by the blast-flash. His comrades, eyes fused, skinned by the heat, are screaming to god to make it stop, even the

unbelievers in–

No. No, not Krasentine either. It's too cold. Far too cold. *Void* cold.

Oll tries to understand where he is, and even *who* he is. It's hard to hold on to his sense of identity. The light is so dazzling and so total, and its glare is thick with swirling white flecks, a blizzard that settles on him softly… Apple blossom, almond petals, strewn by a spring gust. Confetti. Ticker tape–

But the light isn't light. Or, rather, it isn't *only* light. It is a consciousness, a property of the cosmos. He is in the presence of *something*, and that something is voraciously bright in his mind. The light is dismantling his thoughts. He feels the old, tell-tale twitch of his left eyelid, that trusty indicator that psykanic power is close by.

He sinks to his knees. Overcome, he understands where he is. At Krasentine, there was no god to call on, because everyone was an unbeliever. There was no Chione, daughter of Boreas, in Thrace, because Chione, daughter of Boreas, was an invention of the bards.

But there is something like a god *here*.

He's trembling. He can't control it. It's more than fear. It's beyond wonder. It exceeds awe. There is a smell, a taste in his mouth. Osmogenesia. The quality of sanctity. *I'm having a stroke,* he thinks. The burned taste, the visual disturbance–

No. It's not subjective. It's real. It's everywhere, in the dust beneath him, the air around him, the atoms of his body, the synaptic exchange of his thoughts. An absolute propinquity. It is both beyond him and within him, ineffable, a pure instant of exquisite theopathy.

Oll reaches instinctively for the symbol at his throat, the tiny golden phylactery, but as he touches it, his prehension grasps a sacrosanct truth.

This isn't *his* god.

It's not a god at all. But it's *something*. Something no one asked for, no one needed, and no one has ever prayed to.

It is not a maker. It is an un-maker. It is not a source of creation. It's a fount of oblivion. The presence he can feel, the consciousness, is a force of merciless judgement, sublime fury, and cruel rationality. And it's getting stronger.

He topples forward onto his hands and knees, light-blind. His groping fingers find something on the broken ground in front of him.

The ball of thread.

He clutches it, like some pathetic lifeline, as though it will pull him away from the light, or lead him to safety. But there is no safety, not anywhere, and this map-thread only ever had one purpose. To bring him here. This is where he wanted to be, though that seems like an insane thing to want.

No one would want to be here.

This is revelation.

‘I know you,’ he says.

Cold, white fire bathes him. Flakes of ash, or snow, or blossom petals, settle on his face, his lips, and swirl into his mouth.

‘Burn me if you want, but I *know* you.’

The glare pulses, then it fades. Not completely – it is still sickeningly fierce – but the white fire dims to a stratospheric blue, just enough for Oll to see again.

The Scholaster Hall is gone. So has the city, for as far as he can see. The divine light has ravaged the intersectional realm and left nothing standing for kilometres, except baked rubble caked in white ash. The sky is black, and the horizon in every direction is a tracery of lightning, whipping, flashing, streaking, searing, and utterly silent. It is as though he is alone on an Arctic plain under a bowl of night, at the stilled eye of a vast storm that has drawn up around him and halted. There are no stars. The scoured landscape fumes lazy, white smoke. The cold air is thick with a gentle blizzard of ash, and motes of blue-white energy that twinkle like voltaic sparks.

Ahead of him, six metres away, stands a giant human figure. It is motionless, its arms at its sides. It is radiating a power so intense he can make out no detail. It is glowing white-hot, bright as the silent lightning, a silhouette in negative.

‘Do you know me?’ he calls out to it. ‘Do you recognise me?’

The figure doesn’t move. The figure doesn’t answer.

Oll struggles to his feet. He realises there’s more than one figure. The others are identical: lambent, phosphorescent humanoid forms. The next one is further away, perhaps twenty metres behind the first, then another a similar distance beyond that. Another stands to his left. There are seven of them. They form a loose circle some sixty metres across.

Behind them, an immense black sphere appears to sit on the baked earth. It

is impossible to judge its scale. It is like a polished black moon resting on the surface of the world. White smoke smoulders off its shimmering surface, and the ring of soundless lightning is reflected in its glossy shell. Though the sphere is liquid black, it is the source of all the light. It is blindingly black, so fulgent that he can't look directly at it. It makes his eyes ache and, like the phosphorescent figures, it leaves lingering blind-spot blurs on his retinas. The incandescent glare is radiating out of it, so that Oll, the parched rubble, and even the silent, luminous figures are casting hard, attenuated shadows away from it.

Oll thinks to look around. A little way behind him, the bodies of John, Leetu and the Astartes Loken are sprawled in the ashen dust. He wants to go to them and see if they are still alive, but he doesn't dare. If he is able to rouse them, they would wake to find this. He can't do that to them. No one should have to waken to this horror. They should be spared this. Everyone in the galaxy should be spared it. No one should have to see what he is seeing, or experience what he is experiencing.

He rises. A cold wind moans.

'You saved me,' he says. He's addressing the ominous black sphere, because he knows it's the only thing present that can hear him. It is the consciousness that has swallowed him. 'You saved me, or spared me. You *do* know me, don't you? You know who I am.'

He starts to shuffle forward, unsteady.

'What have you done?' he calls out.

Nothing answers him, not even thought.

'How can you be this?' he yells, stumbling towards the sphere with greater urgency. 'How can you become this? *You?* Has your madness and bloody pride led you so far astray?'

The nearest luminous figure starts to buzz as he moves, as though in menace, but it does not stir. Oll halts.

'What are you going to do? Punish me? Smite me down?'

Silence.

'I came a long way to find the man I once knew, and I find *this!* Speak to me!'

Silence. The wind laments.

'Speak to me! You've destroyed everything! Consumed *everything!* You've burned a path right through this hell-hole, but you stopped when

you got to me! You could've burned me *too*, but you didn't! Why? What stopped you? Recognition? Because you *knew* me? Or what? Was it shame? *Speak* to me!'

+Ollanius.+

Oll freezes. He honestly hadn't expected to get a reaction, but his name is suddenly on the dusty wind, a psychic articulation that gnaws at the edge of his mind.

'Yes, it's me. I hear you.'

+Ollanius. Stop.+

Oll falters. It's not His voice. It's not the voice of the man he once knew, or even the voice of the something He's become since. It's another voice, very faint.

'Actae?'

+Ollanius. Walk. Walk away. Go now. Do not. Do not force this confrontation.+

'You're alive?'

Her mind-words are still weak, and almost annihilated by pain. He can't imagine what she is suffering. But he can feel that it's a sudden and deep desperation that's giving her the strength to talk to him.

+Barely. Still. And so are you. Walk. Walk away. The. The Dark King will not tolerate your accusations for long.+

'The Dark King?' Oll groans, his voice tiny. 'This is the Dark King? *He's* the Dark King?'

+Almost. The transmutation is taking place. I can feel it. Another few moments, and it will be complete.+

'But Lupercal–'

+We were. We were wrong. We should have realised. Realised it could be either of them. The stronger Will–+

Oll starts to blunder forwards again. The luminous figure close by buzzes its angry threat again.

+Go back, Ollanius! He will. Will kill you!+

'I don't think He will,' says Oll. 'He's stopped. He's stopped dead in His tracks. I've got a chance to–'

+No chance. He's stopped because. Because He knows you. Finding you here has surprised Him. He has. He has suspended his assault to consider this, but His patience. His patience will not last long if you provoke Him.+

‘You can sense this?’

+His mind. His mind is deafening. Ollanius, we were so wrong. Wrong about everything. In extremity, the Emperor has. Has embraced what he long denied.+

‘How can this be? Actae, how?’

+Lupercal is strong. Stronger than he expected. The power. The power of Chaos is quite beyond anything he anticipated. It has raised a realm of Chaos. He has tried to fight it. He has tried to fight through it to reach Horus and vanquish him. But he was not. Not strong enough. So he made. Made a choice. He made himself stronger.+

‘The warp?’ asks Oll.

+The warp. He has drunk of the warp. He has drawn on its power to fight Chaos. But he has drunk too much and too deeply. It has made him thus. It has made him the very thing he resolved to stop.+

‘The Dark King? That’s what the name means?’

+A god. That is what He is in the process of becoming.+

‘No. I completely refuse to accept that. This is… this is just a new aspect, another *version* of Himself, a force of wrath and vengeance. Another mask, another artful disguise to project–’

+More than that.+

Oll gazes at the gleaming black sphere. He swallows hard.

‘No,’ he murmurs. ‘No, Actae. That’s just the latest expression of His arrogance.’

+He is immeasurably strong, Ollanius.+

‘You don’t have to be strong to be right,’ Oll snaps. He resumes his stumbling approach towards the sphere. ‘And this, this is *wrong*. If this is deliberate, or even willing, it’s still a mistake. The latest mistake in a life of forced, rushed errors. This is irrational, and the man I knew was nothing if not rational.’

+Don’t! He can hear you–!+

‘I hope so. He will hear me on this. He will speak to me.’

+Ollanius!+

He hears the witch’s fading cry, but he ignores it. He stares up at the sphere. Its surface is like polished obsidian.

‘You paused your onslaught because you know me!’ he yells. ‘Well, if you know me, speak to me! Do me that decency!’

The wind sighs. Oll becomes aware of something flashing and blinking in the corner of his eye. He glances aside, and sees that the closest of the luminous figures is flickering. Its inner light is pulsing, and slowly dimming. It's happening to all the figures in the ring around the sphere. The radiance in them is burning out, each one fluttering like an old lumen globe that's about to fail. The light coming from them pales from painful white, to hot flame, to pit-fire orange. By the time it has dulled to a glowing ember red, the figures have taken on substance; their true forms, hidden behind the light, finally revealed. They are warriors, giant warriors in ornate plate. They are blackened with soot and char, smoke boiling off them.

Oll picks his way across the rubble and chalky dust to the nearest of them. It is stock-still, like an effigy, staring out at the distance. It towers over him like a menhir. He can feel the kiln heat still emanating from it as it cools. It's a Custodian, he realises. It's one of His appalling supermen.

Coming closer, Oll halts and recoils slightly. He can smell burned flesh. The Custodian is dead. It is standing bolt upright, a vigilant sentinel, but it is lifeless, and has been for some time. Its once-golden Aquilon plate is more than blackened, it's burned and deformed by intense heat. The lance weapon in what's left of its smouldering hand is mangled and broken. Half of its face is gone, the other half a burned-out skull, smoke oozing from the empty socket and bleeding like steam between the last of the scorched teeth. Shreds of tarry meat cling to the flame-darkened bones.

'What have you done?' Oll murmurs. He stumbles on and reaches the next of the figures. Its state is similar. Its spear, broken off, is fused to the roasted bones of its hand. The remains held upright by the torched power armour are half-incinerated. Treacly black sludge coats the burned skeleton. The skull's lower jaw hangs loose and low, as though in mid-scream, kept in place by the last, cooked tendons.

The third seems little better, but as Oll approaches it, he sees some hints of auramite glinting beneath the powder of soot. This one still has some skin, broiled to leather, on its face. It has a mark on it too, a patch of its heavy breastplate that is curiously intact. Oll sees the goldwork there, the remains of ornate inlay. Some symbol, a faintly glowing sigil that looks hand-drawn, has been marked on that area of breastplate, and it has remained untouched.

Oll stares at it, trying to make sense of the symbol.

The Sentinel's eyes snap open.

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8:iii

A warning ignored

I am old. I am tired.

I sit upon the Golden Throne.

I am so far past the extremities of physical pain and death, I feel nothing. Senses numb, nerves ripped out, I float, insensible, the facsimile of my life prolonged by Vulkan's thankless toil.

So when new pain flares upon me, it comes as a shock. I thought I was beyond such things. I am not.

The pain is not physical. There is not enough of me left to register such sensations. It is mental. It is psychological. It is anguish.

I was braced for grief. I was steeled to witness the worst. Lupercal victorious. The Triumph of Ruin. Chaos ascendant. The end of this world. The loss of the last loyal sons. The fall of my old friend and King-of-Ages.

These outcomes have always been very real possibilities. I thought I was ready to greet them should they come about.

I had never imagined that there could be worse.

I was not ready for this.

I have not been able to see my beloved friend for a while now. That which engulfs him has grown too dark and turbulent, and that which he has become too bright, a dot of white light blazing in the mephitic blackness. A lone star. I have been able to discern no detail, no specifics. I have contented myself merely to watch the progress of that single, steadfast star, and know that, while it shines and continues its advance, there is still hope.

But it has hesitated. It has wavered. And it has dwindled a little, not by any great measure of magnitude, but enough that my mindsight can penetrate the glare and see–

My king, undone. Not by his first-found's rage, nor by the calumny of traitors, nor even by the spite of daemons.

He is undone by his own hand.

He has carved a path through the realm of Chaos that the first-found has unleashed upon Terra. Step by step, he has cut his track into that boiling heart of Ruin, and has laid waste to everything in his way. A great swathe of the Inevitable City has been reduced to a City of Dust in his wake.

But to do that, to do that and survive, he has been obliged to draw on the warp surrounding him. At every step, he has glutted himself on its power. This I saw him do, before he became too bright to behold. It was a wondrous skill, the highest form of the psyker's craft. No one else could do it. He turned the warp back on Chaos, empowering himself and his stalwart Companions, for without that strength, he would have been overwhelmed and snuffed out.

Now, as his light dims for a moment, I see what this has done to him. He is scarcely recognisable.

I see, far off – yet just outside – the endless, empty city of memory and melancholy. I see its dirty roofscape, its overgrown byways. I see, amid that dingy sprawl, a great ribbon of destruction running into its heart, a strip of charred land and pale ash, where all that stood has been reduced to dry and scattered cinders. This was my king's progress, the scale of his ferocity. In the dead streets beyond, traitors and Neverborn wretches flee in massed panic ahead of his advancing destruction.

I see a patch of burned dust where he has stopped to rest. I see that dust, bright like powdered snow, the rubble like white charcoal or pumice, light

and friable. I see the super-storm of his Will, where it has halted around him, a coruscating ring of balefire and corposant like a forest of neon trees, silent and obedient. I see the dead he has left in his wake, the scorched remains and partial vestiges, twisted in pugilistic attitudes, contorted by heat. I see the last of his Hetaeron Companions, frozen around him. They are all, save one, dead. Worthy Taurid and the lauded Ravengast, the ever-resolute Nmembo, great Zagrus, mighty Xadophus and that fine soul Karedo, they are dead. They have been used too hard, and too much power channelled through them; so much power it has burned out even the flawless, perfect bodies of the Legio Custodes. Their flesh is consumed, their souls are smoke. They stand, fire-gutted, like macabre parodies of the statues in this palace.

Only one survives. Brave Caecaltus, inured perhaps by the sigil-mark I set upon him. Yet even he is half eaten-up by the fire he has been forced to carry, and the unrelenting will he has been compelled to conduct. Life is but a dying spark in his ravaged shell. It is harrowing to see.

Does my king know what he has done to them? Does he know he has blown them out like over-surged fuses? He must, for I see him there too, my old friend, my King-of-Ages, bloated and transmuted with the warpfire he has absorbed. I have never seen a being so potent. I did not know such a creature was possible. He mocks the gods, real or imaginary, with his power.

His senses, perceptions and capabilities are fast exceeding those mighty gifts he possessed of old, even the utmost potential of them. This entelechy will dwarf them, ascending a whole new scale of ability. What he is becoming now will make the Master of Mankind seem like a mere mortal.

He is becoming a thing of absolutes. No shred of humanity, nor even Perpetuity, will remain when the process is complete. He will be ascendent.

Once again, one final time, fate plays its hand, and shows me its cards. It reveals, as ever, though I constantly think I will know better *this* time, that it will always have the capacity to confound me, and overthrow the greatest hopes and best-laid plans of mankind and its master.

I thought I had foreseen all eventualities and configurations. And not just me… *we* thought it. He and I, we planned for everything. We thought we

had predicted every permutation.

But not this. And irony lurks, as salt for that wound. For we were told this before we even started. The old prophecy, writ prior to mankind's ascent, carved on stones that had weathered long before human eyes beheld them, uttered on extinct winds, daubed on walls of long-neglected grottos. The old prediction, whispered in the lightless halls of the warp. The old warning. The portent of the Dark King.

It was a prophecy so ancient and obscure, we thought it had no bearing on our Imperial age. It was a monitory rumour that had lurked behind all of mankind's mythologies since time began, and in the shadows of other species' mythologies too. Aeonic lore is full of such vatic nonsenses and falsehoods, mantic rumours that never mean what they say, or amount to nothing. We gave it the same credence as the old stories of gods, for they had never existed, and all that was said about them was meaningless.

If we regarded it at all, it was as an admonition of the threat of Chaos. If it presaged anything, it was what Horus Lupercal could become if we did not stop him.

But time, once begun, is now suspended. All the laws and rubrics of life and the universe, which we trusted, are untied or overturned. From meaninglessness, there comes meaning. It was not a portent, it was a promise. It was the story of a god, which we ignored, for there were no gods.

Yet now there is.

In a supreme effort to drive back Chaos, we have become our own doom. Mankind, and the constellations, will pay for it.

The Dark King, about to be born, has gorged on power, but that surfeit merely makes his hunger grow. He will feed until the galaxy grows cold, and nothing remains except the dark husks of stars that once shone as brightly as him.

While we held firm, and faced down the greatest threat to human life, another, greater threat arose behind our backs.

I see what he is becoming. I see what he will become. No power in creation can stand in opposition or prevent it.

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8:iv

Incarnate

Oll starts back in horror. The Sentinel's bloodshot, desiccated eyes gaze down at him.

'Ollanius,' it says. Its jaw creaks as it moves, dried flesh and ligaments stretching. Its voice is as arid as desert rock or furnace ash.

'You're alive…'

'Yes, Ollanius.'

'Are you… Who *are* you? That's *you*, isn't it?'

'I am Proconsul Caecaltus Dusk,' the figure says.

'No, I don't think you are,' says Oll, fighting his fear and disgust. 'That's not who's speaking.'

'My king bids me serve Him as an aspect.'

'Please,' says Oll. He turns and spits to clear his mouth. The stench is revolting. 'Face me yourself. Don't speak to me through another.'

'There is no alternative, Ollanius. One glimpse of my king would scatter your atoms. This must suffice.'

Oll tries to stop himself shaking. Abject terror is upon him, and only the anger he feels towards his old friend is stopping that terror from paralysing

him completely.

‘Y-you…’ he stammers. ‘You will speak with me, then? It has been a long time–’

‘My king did not halt His advance out of sentiment, Ollanius. He is not stopping to reminisce with an old friend.’

‘But–’

‘In the grip of this calamity, do you think my king would waste time on an idle reunion?’

‘Then why?’ asks Oll.

‘Recognition of the anomalous. Ollanius, my king is approaching apotheosis. He can perceive structures and systems of materia beyond anything He has ever quantified before, and He begins to see yet deeper structures beyond those. The amplification of His consciousness is expanding. My king did not stop because He was surprised to find Oll Persson in His path. He stopped because He could see how supremely unlikely that encounter was. For you to be here, Ollanius, in this precise un-place at this precise un-time… It is the work of the very deepest cosmological alignments. A singular thing. It suggests the highest level of empyric synchronicity, of resonance. Of the intervention of powerful parties and influences.’

‘Yes,’ says Oll. ‘Several powerful parties acted to help get me here. In the end, more than anything, it was luck. Or destiny.’

‘Such concepts, Ollanius,’ the dry voice whispers, ‘fate, luck, destiny… are merely pieces of inadequate mortal vocabulary that connote the cosmological processes my king is referring to. He detects too the fingerprints of Erda, and of others of the Perpetual line, and of the xenos Eldrad Ulthran.’

‘They all played a part,’ says Oll.

‘They all should know better than to meddle in the operation of His Will.’

‘We had to try,’ says Oll.

‘You have not changed. You have previously opposed my king with some dedication, yet without any means to back up that opposition.’

‘Because I pose no threat to you? I can oppose you with my thoughts, and with what I believe. Just because you could annihilate me with a blink doesn’t make you correct. It never did. It just makes you strong.’

‘You are inflexible and rigid in your outlook,’ the dead voice of the

Sentinel replies. ‘If it is your stubborn nature that has brought you face to face with my king, then it is characteristically futile. You have nothing to show for your life, Ollanius, a dismal verdict considering how much life you were given. You have done nothing.’

‘I’d rather have done nothing with my life than too much,’ Oll says.

‘My king had forgotten how tedious your sophistry could be. Did they think… Erda, and the other powers who arranged this… that you would make the best spokesman? That you would be the best choice of supplicant to approach Him?’

Oll sighs. ‘I reject the word “supplicant”. And one of those “other powers”, it seems, was Malcador. One of your own. Do you not think that significant?’

‘Why do you believe this?’

‘I had lost my way. I was found by a warrior, Loken, one of your Sigillite’s Chosen. Only then was I able to find my way to you.’

‘Malcador.’ The Sentinel seems to weigh the name, as though judging its value.

‘His was the only wisdom you ever trusted outside of your own. Doesn’t that tell you something?’

The Sentinel pauses, and appears to reflect upon the question. Oll waits, and struggles to steady his senses. The wash of pale blue light is unforgiving, and it’s triggering neuropathic discomfort. Flashes of jade and azure, as iridescent as the colours of a peacock’s display, are beginning to invade his peripheral vision. A man, even one as long-lived as him, is not built to stand in the presence of ascendant power for this long.

‘My king’s Regent delights in weaving schemes around schemes,’ the proconsul decides. ‘He does this to establish ingenious layers of redundancy and alternative. He always has a fail-safe. My king has always allowed him such flexibility.’

The Sentinel slowly tilts its head, with a groan of neck tendons, and regards the mark on its breastplate. ‘Malcador’s involvement does not surprise my king, or give Him pause.’

‘Really? He’s taken your Throne to allow you to do this. Don’t you wonder why he would build redundancies and alternate options into so stark an imperative?’

‘By which you mean?’

‘By which I mean he feared that this could go wrong,’ says Oll, ‘and that even the best chances could fail. So he put effort into making sure there were other chances, however small, even longshots, still in play. And he was right.’

‘By which you mean?’ the Sentinel repeats.

‘It *has* gone wrong.’

‘Not true.’

Oll shakes his head. ‘It *has* gone wrong. Surely you can see that?’

‘No.’

‘You are becoming the Dark King incarnate,’ says Oll.

‘No. That is just an old name. Irrational nonsense. Astrotheological superstition.’

‘It’s not,’ says Oll, despairing. ‘Please… What do you think is happening here?’

‘This is vastation, Ollanius,’ the Sentinel replies. ‘The Harrowing of Chaos. My king is here to stop Horus Lupercal before he obliterates our species. Nothing is more important than that.’

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8:v

Angel, prey

He’s taunting you. He’s mocking you. You don’t rise to it, but honestly? It wounds you a little. You thought he was better than that. You thought, in fact, that he was perfect. This is disappointing.

‘You lack.’ That’s what he said. Clearly, all evidence to the contrary. His defiance you can understand. Sanguinius still thinks he’s fighting the good fight on the right side of history. He hasn’t fully grasped the nature of this situation. But the taunting? That’s beneath him. It’s base impudence, and it does not become him.

Of course, he’s only doing it because he’s scared.

You can’t blame him for that. If your positions were reversed, you’d be scared too.

What use is his bravado? He can’t provoke you. He can’t goad you into becoming anything that you are not already. You lack *nothing*. The taunting just makes him seem juvenile, and you don’t want to think of him that way. He’s *Sanguinius*. You’ve always loved him. You want to remember him as a paragon of virtue, not as some–

Ah, except the bravado’s not for you at all, is it? It’s for him. You see it

now. He's never had to *act* brave in his life. You've always thought of him as naturally brave, the bravest soul you've ever known. But it's not the case. When you're as powerful as Sanguinius, you're afraid of nothing, and bravery is easy. Everything else he's ever faced, he's faced without fear. But he's having to act now, and he's not very good at it. He's never had to *pretend* his courage before.

'Don't,' you say, very gently. You don't want to see a life as glorious as his end in humiliation. But he mistakes your remark. He thinks he's getting to you. He comes at you again, eyes bright, sword brighter.

You sidestep. His blade scrapes your ribs. He arcs up and away.

It's instructive, actually. For him to behave this way tells you a great deal about what you've become. For the peerless Sanguinius to show fear, well, that says a lot. Will the others be the same, you wonder, when their turns come? Will your father's mask fall too?

Sparks dance. He has passed you on the left side, raking with his sword. He comes within an inch of your grasp. These are huge risks he's taking. He really is tremendously courageous, even if it is an act. In fact, what is courage, *except* an act? Courage isn't a passive quality. Whether instinctive or forced, it's the condition of acting in the face of danger.

Well, there is danger here, so it doesn't matter if his courage is genuine or imitation. He is resolved to make a fight of it. He's determined to show no fear, or back down in the face of insuperable odds. Back in the day, you adored him because you thought him fearlessly brave. But it was effortless back then. To see him now, fighting on despite his mortal dread of you, you understand he has become fear*fully* brave. That *is* impressive. It makes you love him a little more.

He flies at you again, a flash of gold in the gloom of your Court. You spin *Worldbreaker*, light as a twig, to block him. He evades you once more. Barely. His blade hacks splinters off your shoulder plate as he streaks past.

You turn and watch him as he banks overhead, a gleaming eagle, whirring through the shafts of light in the clerestory high above. Those wings, that soaring grace…

He loops down behind you. A rush of air, the sting of his blade. You swing the Talon and miss. Even injured, he is still so fast.

But injured, and pushing himself so hard, he'll tire himself out. He'll ebb. He'll grow slower. Fear and effort will eat up all that courage and speed,

and then it’ll all be over.

Or, perhaps, before that moment comes, futility will overwhelm him. You can sense it seeding in him, sapping his vigour. At what point will he realise that everything he’s doing is utterly pointless?

How beautiful will that moment of recognition be? You want to see that futility dawning in his eyes. Close up. Face to face. You want to smell it on his breath.

He hits you again. He soars clear, hooking a long, wide curve around the end columns. As he comes out of the turn, his wings begin to beat more furiously as he accelerates into the next run. You try to block him–

Another strike. A good one. That would have disembowelled Angron. That would have sheared the Pale King’s heart in two. That would have taken Ferrus’ head from his shoulders.

You’re still holding back a little. He doesn’t have to die. When that instant of recognition finally hits him, you’ll give him one last chance to reconsider his position. So let him wear himself out. Let him take out his anger on you.

He needs it. He needs to feel as if he’s tried. It’s pride, of course. He is his father’s favourite son, the Brightest One, beloved by all. He has always been the exemplar of unflinching loyalty. He has always won. He was never going to go down without a fight.

Once futility has broken him, you will lift him up again. You will carry him to the throne you have prepared for him, and invite him to sit there and rest. He will have played his part, and done all he could. There’ll be no shame in saying yes to you then.

He is your favourite. Always has been. You want him with you, because that will mean something. If this defiance had come from Rogal or Constantin, you would have destroyed them quickly. Their value, and they are both great warriors, is as trophies, as heads for your wall, proof of your prowess. Look upon my kills, father, and despair!

But with Sanguinius, though he is the mightiest of all, it’s not about victory in arms. It’s about victory in spirit. To break him, to bend him to your will, now that’s a true triumph. The embodiment of Imperial loyalty, cowed at your feet, feeding from your hand, pledging his devotion. Look upon *that*, father.

It won’t be easy. If it was easy, it would be worthless. You’ve tried before, several times. The wily Erebus, apostle of filth and lies, attempted it on

your behalf at Signus Prime, and failed. It was always going to be a slow erosion.

He strikes you again, then again. You can actually taste his fear. An angel's terror, so very sweet. He is, you believe, finally beginning to understand.

That's the source of his fear, this fear that's so new and unfamiliar to him. It's not fear of you, per se, not of your numinous power, not even that you are Horus Lupercal, Warmaster, a being no sane creature could want to face in battle or hope to vanquish.

It's a fear of the unknown. Sanguinius, poor Sanguinius, even at this bitter end, still sees things framed by Imperial thinking: dark against light, Imperium against traitor, father against son. It's pernicious. It's wrong-headed. It's a view of cosmic reality that is utterly unsupportable. Sanguinius, like too many millions of others in the Imperial fold, is so grievously conditioned in his mode of understanding, he is as good as brainwashed.

He sees himself as the last good man standing. The last loyal son. The last bastion of noble valour, fighting to the death in his father's name, refusing to submit. That's why you love him. It is painfully heroic. It is the quintessence of what he is.

But he is starting to perceive the realigned truths of the universe. He is beginning to understand that everything he knows about man and gods, about heroes and Chaos, is a lie. That dawning comprehension is terrifying him.

While he was fighting his way through the ship to reach you, the material world underwent an ontological shift. True power replaced false ideologies. True majesty replaced debased glory. You are not evil, and that which you stand for is not evil, for there is no evil. There is no darkness. There is only everything, conjoined and suffused by the warp, which you channel through your soul.

Every value that Sanguinius was raised to believe in is undone or shown as dishonest. The only blight in the cosmos is the fading stench of your father's tyrannical diktat that He, and He alone, was fit to determine the future.

Sanguinius will burn himself out. The scales will fall from his eyes. He will blink, in belated apperception, at a new configuration of reality in which the false promises and selfish desires of your father are exposed as

the venality they always were.

He will see, at the very last, the way things truly are. An epistemological revelation. Weeping in joy, he will beg you for forgiveness.

And you will, in your infinite mercy, grant it to him. It will be the greatest moment of his life, and the sweetest victory of yours.

Then, your father will see you both, and He will see that everything He is and was is nothing, the vain dreams of a prideful, arrogant man who has failed in every possible way.

Sanguinius strikes you again. You snap at him with your Talon. He soars away.

But the end is near. He’s getting tired.

Behold, caught between the pincer of your claws, a single white feather.

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8:vi

The man that did not

‘You are becoming a god, born from the warp,’ says Oll. ‘You may not recognise it yet, or be prepared to accept it, but you are. And that, quite clearly, is the last thing you ever wanted to be.’

‘My king is simply empowered,’ replies Caecaltus Dusk, though the voice he uses is not his own. ‘He has fortified Himself against the power of Chaos. Such levels of power are essential to overcome Horus Lupercal and all that he has unleashed.’

‘I understand,’ Oll says. ‘I understand what’s at stake. And I’m absolutely certain that’s why you’ve done what you’ve done. You’ve strengthened yourself to defeat your son, but, somewhere in the course of that, you’ve crossed a line. A line you drew in the first place. You’re becoming the very thing you abhor.’

‘And you have been sent here to stop me?’

Oll doesn’t react to the personal pronoun.

‘I think,’ he says instead, ‘I’ve simply been sent to talk to you. To intervene. But I had no idea what I’d be talking to. What you’re becoming–’

‘My king has no intention of diminishing His power.’

‘Then you should reconsider,’ says Oll, looking Caecaltus Dusk in the eye, and trying to ignore the withered horror he sees there. ‘You’re a man. The most remarkable and powerful man that’s ever existed, but still, just a man. Every step you’ve taken has been based on rationality, and it’s created the Imperium. But you retained your humanity, even when it would have been easy to let it go. You retained your emotions, because you knew they were vital. You even forged it into the sons you made, because it was that important to you. That man is still inside you somewhere. I hope he is.’

‘I must be strong to fight my son.’

‘Yes,’ says Oll. ‘Yes, you must. But not strong like this. Did you ever consider what the big difference between you and me was?’

The proconsul pauses before replying, as if waiting to be given the right answer.

‘My king is the man that did. You are the man that did not.’

‘A callous way of putting it,’ Oll replies, ‘but true enough. You were ambitious, where I was not. You had a plan, where I did not. But most of all, I was patient. You were not.’

‘Thousands of years of work is not impatience–’

‘Isn’t it?’ Oll replies. He sighs. ‘For all the wonders you’ve built, there was always impatience. Fast, blunt, rational solutions to immensely complex problems. You never could bide your time and work methodically. That, in the end, is why I broke with you. And that, I fear, is why we find ourselves on the brink of cataclysm.’

Oll looks away across the wasteland at the distant curtain of soundless lightning.

‘You need to defeat an immensely powerful adversary,’ he says quietly, ‘so you make yourself stronger without thought to the consequences.’

‘What are those consequences, Ollanius?’ asks Caecaltus Dusk.

‘You will not stop. This expediency will lead to the next, each one justified by the one before. You will never have too much power. You will never have enough. There will always be a reason to seize more.’

‘You talk as though you possess great wisdom and insight, but you do not.’

‘You’re right,’ says Oll. ‘I don’t. None of us foresaw this possibility. Not Erda, the aeldari lord, or even the Sigillite. But my journey to meet you has been counterintuitive. My thinking has been linear, but my route has been backwards.’

He holds out the scorched ball of twine.

‘Time and space are out of joint. I have come to you along a path I am yet to make. Who knows why the Oll Persson who leaves that path wants me to be here? Who knows what he hopes I will prevent?’

‘My king is sympathetic to your concerns, Ollanius, but Chaos must be denied.’

‘On that we agree,’ Oll admits. ‘We always have. But this is not the way.’

‘It is the only way.’

‘No. As things stand, either way, Chaos wins,’ Oll says, raising his hands in weary despair. ‘It doesn’t matter whether Horus triumphs, or you prevail. The warp will become a churning frenzy for millions of years. The material realm will be overcome, and mankind wiped out. You are undoing all you have built.’

‘Horus must be stopped,’ the proconsul insists.

‘Horus, yes. But the warp can’t be defeated. The opposition of materia and immateria is eternal. Stop Horus, yes. Stop his threat.’

Oll falls silent, and looks at the Sentinel.

‘But I’m begging you,’ he says, ‘find another way to do it.’

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8:vii

A vantage

Abaddon spends the better part of an hour killing Word Bearers and the crew of the flagship. They come at his position, raving and deranged. He knows some of them, by face and name, the seniors of the Hort Lupercali. They were good, sound people, and served the *Vengeful Spirit* well. He doesn't know the nature of their madness, but it seems to him a complete and abject fright beyond anything he has ever seen a human manifest. It exceeds, by some magnitude, even the fear that he and his kind inspire in their opponents. Indeed, it eclipses it, for the maniacal Excertus can see full well what they are running towards, yet they are unchecked by the trans-human dread that Astartes normally provoke. Whatever they have seen, it has rendered them insensible to previous limits of aversion.

Absolute fear has made them fearless. The Excertus hurl themselves at Abaddon's line, shrieking, clawing, frothing. It is easy killing, and Abaddon's men take no pride or satisfaction in it.

The Word Bearers are a more significant problem. They are as blind with terror as the Excertus around them, but they are Astartes, with Astartes plate, Astartes weapons, and Astartes power. Stopping their headlong

advance costs Abaddon men. Lorgar’s sons were never the martial equal of the XVI, and what combat technique they previously possessed has been entirely lost to derangement. Yet still, they are Astartes, and their Astartesian potency, though frantic and overwrought, makes them harder to stop, and more than capable of killing Abaddon’s battle-brothers.

When the combat first began, Abaddon considered withdrawing his advance into the defensible area of the flagship’s bridge, and locking his attackers out. Within minutes, it became evident that the tide of madmen, human and transhuman alike, were not out to kill the Sons of Horus. Abaddon and his men had simply stepped into the path of a crazed stampede. If the terror-stricken mass had an objective at all, it was to get into the bridge levels, and the Sons of Horus were simply an obstacle.

As he fought, Abaddon wondered what his unhinged opponents could have seen out there in the ruptured, petrifacted landscape to make them think that the *Vengeful Spirit* offered any sanctuary. He had seen enough of the flagship to know it was just as hazardous as this impossible outside.

Besides, the bridge offered him no sanctuary either. If Sycar’s Terminators could claw the bulk hatch open, Lorgar’s Cataphractii could break it in just as easily. Strategic withdrawal would push him into a long, protracted series of defensive fall-aways, driving his men back the way they had come.

Abaddon was not prepared to give ground. Going backwards would not help him find his father. Accepting the need for active denial, he had advanced supporting forces from the bridge space, into the tortured, schismed landscape beyond.

‘Your command?’ Sycar had asked as he brought his Justaerin forward.

‘Illuminate them,’ Abaddon had replied.

Since then, it has been slaughter. Sons of Horus squads push forwards from the bridge-hatch strongpoint, flanking each other meticulously, working with accuracy and precision, creating a crescent repulse to keep the onslaught at bay. The Word Bearers, interspersed with howling Excertus, form a muddled, ungoverned charge that breaks against the XVI’s line. The bodies of the fallen start to pile up, Word Bearers and exploded Excertus tangled together, gradually forming jumbled ridges that the Sons of Horus can use as cover as they slowly expand the rim of their line.

It is senseless. The sons of Lorgar simply scramble into view and run at Abaddon’s forces, brandishing their blades or firing without thought to aim.

They run directly into the XVI’s denial zones, and are greeted by bolter fire and plasmics. They are cut down short of the line. It takes two or three mass-reactives to stop some of the larger brutes. The supply of them seems inexhaustible. Every time there is a lag or break, Abaddon thinks they’re done, and the flood of madness abated. Then more appear, storming across the mounded rubble in untidy mobs, and the steady firing resumes.

Abaddon begins to consider munitions. It starts to seem entirely possible that the apparently endless numbers of Word Bearers will still be stumbling into view long after his companies have burned through their stocks.

Against Baraxa’s objections, Abaddon takes a squad and breaks from the line, advancing at pace to clear the closest terrain feature, a long spur of buckled rockcrete and upthrust ground rising into a low ridge and hill some two hundred metres to the left flank. Abaddon has no working auspex or sensoria, and the ridge, though dwarfed into insignificance by the shelving mountains beyond, is the highest terrain feature in the immediate vicinity. He hopes for a vantage. He needs to get a broader picture in order to make an assessment. From the ridge, he will be able to scope for several kilometres, and estimate approaching Word Bearers numbers, rather than waiting for them to appear at shooting distance.

It becomes hard going. The rain has grown heavier, swirled by a directionless wind. Abaddon can hear a repeating booming sound above the crack and clatter of the persistent battle to his right. The booming is probably the gusting buffet of the wind and the thunder of the storm spilling across the un-heavens overhead, but somehow it feels more than that, a louder but more distant sound, the monumental din of impacts, like a cyclopean hammer repeatedly striking a titanic anvil. It sounds like apocalyptic single combat, of a god fighting another god somewhere, far away, of god-weapons clashing against god-armour. He tries to ignore it.

The ridge is a ragged spine where the unstable earth has folded and wrenched upwards. Mobs of Lorgar’s sons and Hort Lupercali are spilling across it to join the rush below, and Abaddon’s squad is, several times, forced into close-range running melees with blades and point-blank shots. Once again, there is an impression that they, like the ridge itself, are simply in the way, and that they are trying to cross against the grain of a mass exodus so pent with dread and desperation that it cannot be deflected. He starts to see non-combat flagship personnel and low-grade servitors in the

stampede.

He kills them too, for even unarmed loaders and maintenance servitors turn on him, and attempt to claw through him.

His blade is wet with blood, his plate wet with rain. A Word Bearer, a brother of the Akrak Jal, blunders across his path, and swings a bardiche at him with a breathless shriek. Abaddon shoots him in the face, and kicks his sprawling corpse down the rubble slope of the ridge. A numbing blow from behind knocks him to his knees. When he rolls and rises, he sees a Graven Star Terminator, its plate acid-etched with Lorgar's tracts, and Ulnok gamely trying to drive it back to protect his First Captain.

Past any point of patience, Abaddon lends Ulnok his full support. He puts a mass-reactive into the Word Bearer's throat plating at point-blank range. The immense plate holds, but the detonation shudders the huge killer backwards, allowing Ulnok, with swift precision, to run his sword in through the armpit seal. Blood seems to well out of the Terminator, spurting through the seams and joints of its upper torso plating, but Ulnok's blade is wedged, and he is being dragged towards the blade of the Word Bearer's heavy poleaxe, the same poleaxe that has left a dent in the back of Abaddon's armour.

Abaddon shears his sword into the side of the Terminator's neck, twisting and gouging to dig through the interlocked seal. Working together, pushing in from both sides, Abaddon and Ulnok wrestle the Terminator backwards, grinding and scraping their jammed blades to open plate and extend wounds. When the Word Bearer goes down, drizzling blood from every fissure, it almost takes them both with it.

Abaddon steadies Ulnok as the heavy corpse rolls and slides away down the scree, then draws in the rest of his squad. They resume their ascent. Abaddon can hear Baraxa on the link, patchy and incomprehensible.

At the summit, Abaddon gains his vantage at last.

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8:viii

Angel, tormentor

Sanguinius flows sideways through the air. By any measure, he is a significant figure: a humanoid form scaled far greater than any man, powerfully muscled, winged, and cased in heavy armour. He has substantial mass and vast strength. He is the imperative, physical punctuation to almost any fight.

But he seems weightless.

He shimmers around his adversary, illusory, fleeting, a brief beam of light, a wind-borne leaf, a circling bird darting around a thorn tree. He scarcely touches the deck, as though he is buoyant and too light to land, as though he is an etheric spirit born to dwell forever far above the dull world of earth in the bright realm of wind and air.

His wings drive, and he vaults his enemy, flurries of sparks trailing him as the edge of *Encarmine* slits the heavy wolf pelt and scribes a long, curving gouge across black plate. He lands, the toes of his right foot kissing the ground long enough to drive a pivot that spins him around in the air, a springing rotation which allows his seeking blade another contact. Plate buckles, torn like tin, and sheared cables gout murky cerebrospinal fluid.

The maul tears the air to find him, but he is gone again.

Horus Lupercal is breathing hard, sucking and snorting like a labouring grox. There is spittle on his chin and lips, and the first cast of anger in his dead eyes. This contest is no longer amusing him. He is becoming annoyed.

Full rage will follow. Sanguinius is counting on it. The Horus he loved had a quick temper, pricked easily into wrath, and usually spurred by frustration when people failed to do as they were told, or proved themselves incompetent. Most of all, his rage flared at any act of defiance.

Sanguinius knows what the Warmaster's anger looks like, and he knows how to provoke it. He has no idea what the wrath of this thing – whatever monstrous obscenity Horus has become – will be like. He imagines it will be an abominable fury.

But rage is a weakness in any true warrior. Rage makes a man rash and clumsy, and it diminishes his skill and technique, no matter how highly trained he is. It sucks away finesse. It dilutes focus. It forces errors and overreach, and steals a man's precision and discipline.

Rage, and the loss of control that comes with it, is a self-inflicted wound.

Sanguinius wants that. He wants every advantage he can get, for it was clear from the start that the cards are stacked in his brother's favour. He knows he has to exploit every chink in the Warmaster's armour – physical and mental – if he is to have a chance of winning. He has to force every crack, and make new ones besides. Rage will be one of them, perhaps the key one. If he can goad his fallen brother into outright anger he can level the field a little, for Horus enraged will be Horus diminished. Though far stronger and monumental, Horus will be reduced to bewildered passion, and Sanguinius will be able to dictate the terms of the clash, and reduce his foe with surgical rigour and clear judgement.

He is close to that break point. He has spiked the Warmaster's exasperation. He knows Horus, just as he knows the *Vengeful Spirit*. He knows his brother's secret levels and concealed flaws, because Horus taught them to him. In those far-off days before the shadow fell, Horus shared everything with his angel-brother. That intimate knowledge, granted without vanity or hesitation, has allowed Sanguinius to penetrate the most formidable flagship in the Imperium. It will also lead him to his brother's heart.

Sanguinius speeds between maul and claw, loops, dummies, flits left, and

drives the tip of *Encarmine* deep into Horus' hip. The Serpent's Scales puncture like paper, exhaling steam, oozing thick, curdled blood that runs black. The gleaming Angel's relentless circuits around his ponderous foe have become a kind of dance: nimble, acrobatic, unstinting, elegant. There is intricate grace in his every movement, a demonstration of faultless martial prowess that no one in the universe could replicate. It is dazzling in its exactitude, fluid and pure, almost performative, like a rite or sacred act. There is no effort wasted, no redundancy. It resembles, in its balletic artistry and daedal complexity, the elaborate steps and post-human gymnastics of an aeldari harlequinade.

Perhaps, somehow, they are the same, eternal steps.

The rage is close. The atmosphere of the Lupercal Court is shifting, simmering, sizzling. The light has thickened, and the air is lank with pre-storm pressure. The deck is sweating oily droplets of moisture, and the obsidian blocks of the walls and columns shiver in distress. The background whispering has intensified, hissing like phlegmy static from the shadows and the cloisters and the lightless roofspace. It is agitated, as though dismayed at what it is seeing.

One golden mote slicing the darkness apart, piece by piece.

Horus' wargear is scarred in a double-dozen places. Gouges of bare metal stripe and notch his plate. The wolf pelt is torn and slashed. Severed dermal pipes swing and drip. Blood and plasma drool from ruptures. The armour's reactors and shield generators cough and moan to maintain stability.

Horus himself, his sweating face bathed in raw bloodlight, snarls and grunts, twisting and turning, churning and heaving, but every massive motion is too slow or too late to catch his tormentor. Every footfall is a thunderous Titan-step, ringing and grinding on the deck, and the deck itself is broken in a hundred places, the plating cratered and cracked by misplaced blows and evaded strikes.

The Talon of Horus clenches shut with a whipcrack clang. *Worldbreaker* loops with a moan of torn air. Horus growls, froth flecking the corners of his mouth. He lunges, like a sliding mountain, at the fugitive golden flame that he cannot pin down. The huge maul misses again, but connects with an ouslite pillar, exploding the midsection out of it in a spray of broken stone. The impact is deafening, and the dislodged section slams onto the deck, leaving the broken top and bottom of the column ragged like a stalactite and

stalagmite.

He turns, but Sanguinius has already found him again, arcing in like a seeker missile. *Encarmine*, swung with both hands at full force, strikes the Warmaster's front plating. Failing reactive shields pop with a bang. The blade strikes a thick section clean off the lip of the gorget, and leaves a bloody tear across the Lupercal's left brow and cheek.

Horus roars like a woken dragon.

The rage is here.

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8:ix

Lost in madness

There is no way across. An immense firestorm fills the Palatine Ventilation Canyon, raising furious yellow flames with such force that the fire is howling. All the skyways and bridge-spans have melted or burned through. The great edifice of the Transterran Congress across the gulf is blackened, and parts of it have combusted too. The nearby towers of the Benefice have been reduced to blackened stubs.

Hassan has never seen fire so great that it speaks before. He feels the roaring scream in his bones. The force of the heat is so great, they cannot approach. Ios Raja and the three Astartes allotted to his party might endure briefly, but Hassan and the two Sisters would not. They skirt the southern shoulder of the canyon, and find shelter in the cloisters of the Ordinatory.

Even here, the heat is fierce, and Hassan swelters with pinprick discomfort. They can hear gunfire in the levels below them.

Raja looks at him, as if to ask, ‘What now?’ Hassan is thinking, and concentration is hard. The horrors they have witnessed since setting out from the Rotunda, both close up and at a distance, are etched on his mind. They are so vivid, he cannot see past them.

The final fortress is a fortress no more. The overrun is complete. The traitors are everywhere, pouring into the Sanctum both above ground and below. Hundreds of battles are raging to defend the last acres of the loyal Imperium. As they picked their way around these last-ditch conflicts, Hassan had to fight the urge to abandon his mission and join the struggle, for now every last man and woman counts. But he has a promise to keep, and a job to finish, a job he should not have delegated. He will not die neglecting the wishes of his late master, even though his goal now seems quite futile.

He tries to assess. The way to the Eastern Approaches, the location of Fo's laboratory and his last known whereabouts, is impassable, and the Approaches are overrun besides. From the scrappy intel Moriana was able to gather and send to Hassan, Fo was last seen in the company of Xanthus, the Selenar gene-witch, and the Custodian Amon. He was being moved, but where to? Hassan can't visit the Approaches to see if Xanthus left any clues or indications.

All comms are down. There is no way to know where they were going, or if they are still alive. On top of that, the geography of the Sanctum seems to be in flux, exactly as the mysterious intruder Persson suggested. Even if Hassan knew where Fo was, he can't be sure where that 'where' is any more.

Hassan can only work with the information he has. He has to sort the details clinically, the way his master taught him. Ignore possibilities. Consider only known facts: Fo, Xanthus, Andromeda-17, Amon Tauromachian. What does he know about them? Their profiles. Their behavioural patterns. Their instructions. He knows, fairly well, how Xanthus thinks and operates. But Fo's impulses are impossible to predict, and the Selenar was deliberately brought in as provocateur to skew the–

Wait. He looks at Raja.

'What would make you break orders?' Hassan asks.

The Companion, dried blood crusted on his face, glares back. 'Nothing,' he says.

'Of course,' says Hassan. 'But if I ordered you to break a directive…?'

'You hold authority,' Raja replies, 'so I would observe it, unless it was countermanded by a superior authority.'

'Meaning the Sigillite, the captain-general, or the Emperor?'

Raja nods.

‘No one else?’

‘No one else.’

‘You would not, therefore, break a directive at the request of Xanthus, or another of the Chosen?’

‘Their authority would be insufficient.’

‘But Sentinel Amon was present,’ says Hassan. ‘He was with them, and he went with them. Amon is known to you?’

‘Of course,’ Raja replies.

‘And he is, like you, irreproachable in the performance of his duties?’

Raja glowers. ‘He is Legio Custodes. It is offensive for you to even ask.’

What are you thinking? Aphone Ire signs.

Hassan is about to answer the Vigil Commander when the swell of background gunfire suddenly rises. An archway on the far side of the cloisters blows out, and six men of the Hort Palatine stagger into view, firing behind them as they come.

Bolt-rounds chase them, blowing one off his feet in a belch of flame.

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8:x

Apostolic

Abaddon sees his forces behind and below him, lit by the sparks of their gunfire, encircling the bridge hatch, which is just a blister-like bunker in the wider landscape. The view around it stuns him.

He had begun to accept the idea that a great realm of wilderness had somehow interlaced with the fabric of the flagship's bridge, and that the scale of that wilderness was continental. But from the hill, it seems endless, and its features the contours of a world built for creatures of far greater frame than his. The wind is harsh, the rain vicious. The absence of stars in the tempest-swirled sky seems the worst sign of all, as though he's engulfed by utter emptiness.

The land itself, as far as he can see, is shelved and folded like a crumpled cloth, with rucks of abrupt peaks lifting thousands of metres high. Debris and dead cities clump to the hard angles, sometimes hanging vertically like patches of moss on a wall.

Low, and far away, the same baleful star he saw before swims ominously behind the veil of the storm and the tendrils of warpflux and pseudomatter that stain the sky. The sight of it makes his gorge rise.

He had hoped, perhaps foolishly, that he might see the Lupercal Court, imagining that it, like the flagship's bridge levels, might still exist as some discrete portion of the whole, displaced by the shifted materia. But he cannot. All he can see are the ravaged, overgrown ruins of the limitless city that this landscape once was, a ghost pattern of dead streets, rubble and wreck where fires still burn, all folded and realigned to follow the violently disturbed bedrock.

Down in those streets, amid the ruins and the weeds and the wind-worn ventifacts, he sees the Word Bearers. To his dismay, there are thousands of them, and thousands of Excertus and deck crew besides, spread over several kilometres, but all converging on the position his men are defending. He can taste the frenzy and panic on the wind. There seems to be too many of them, as if the warped nature of this psychoscape is somehow multiplying the stricken crew of his flagship, like the echoes of the damned in hell.

There are too many. Too many even for the drilled perfection of his companies. There will never be enough munitions to halt them all, and then it will come down to blades and close combat. And though the Word Bearers and their cohorts are witless and berserk, and though Abaddon would back any of the Sons of Horus against any son of Lorgar, sheer numbers always determine the outcome of close combat.

Within an hour, his proud units will be overwhelmed and torn limb from limb.

At his side, he hears Ulnok moan in consternation, and presumes his equerry has drawn the same tactical conclusion. But when Abaddon turns to look, he sees it is not that.

A figure is ascending the ridge behind them, making its way calmly to join them at the summit. Abaddon knows it at once. The hated fool, the despised exile, the thought-poisoner, the damned apostle of lies that he personally blames for all that has gone wrong with his world.

Erebus is smiling.

Abaddon raises his sword, and strides to meet him. He will not suffer that smile. He will not be dragged into another maelstrom of half-truth and seductive deceit.

'My brother,' Erebus says, as Abaddon approaches. 'My noble First Captain. Ezekyle.'

Surely he can see that I'm going to kill him, Abaddon thinks. *If I do one*

thing this day, it will be to dash that liar's brains across the rubble of this hellscape, for he is surely, more than anyone, responsible for this.

Erebus is where the fall began.

But Erebus, his face ghastly with tattooed gibberish and ugly scars, keeps smiling. There are dried spots of someone's blood on his cheek and brow.

'Fear is upon the world,' Erebus announces.

Abaddon halts, sword ready.

'Your poor brothers,' Erebus says, glancing into the vale below where Baraxa, Jeraddon, Zeletsis and Sycar command the line against the onslaught. 'They hold true, just as I would expect. Your men are finely disciplined, Ezekyle. Though, of course, they have not witnessed what my kin have witnessed.'

'And what would that be?' growls Abaddon.

'Our future,' Erebus replies. 'Ezekyle, my kin are too lost in dread to know what they are doing, but I have no desire to see your brothers slaughtered. We are of the same blood, on the same side. I would gladly kill any man loyal to the Throne, but we are of the same part. And this slaughter is unseemly.'

'Then call them off,' says Abaddon. 'But I don't think you can.'

Erebus turns and surveys the scene below. He raises his hand. He speaks.

Abaddon has been holding back the Word Bearers for over an hour with every ounce of fury and firepower his companies can muster.

Erebus stops his brethren in their tracks with a single word.

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8:xi

The Chosen way

Move! Srinika Ridhi signs. They have to. They don’t have time to stop and help these men, nor can they risk getting caught up in a rolling fight. Black shapes are following the Hort troopers out onto the yard: Sons of Horus, their guns booming. The XVI have struck the deepest of all, right into the heart of the Palace. Hassan has heard names chanted several times. Vorus Ikari and Ekron Fal. Those captains of the XVI have driven their men hard, and the atrocities they have committed to take the final fortress are already infamous. The echo of their names alone has broken lines of loyalist Excertus, who have fled in terror even though there is nowhere to flee to. Ikari and Fal are the edge of the Warmaster’s blade, the tip of his spear. Their ferocious, unreserved cruelty will soon end what Horus began on Isstvan.

Raja and the Sisters move Hassan down the cloister, away from the combat. The three Astartes – Malix Hest of the Blood Angels, the Praetorian Fist Guil Conort, and Ibelin Kumo of the White Scars – close in behind, covering the retreat with suppression fire. The three of them were seconded to Hassan’s mission from Rotunda defence. They have defended

him bravely and almost wordlessly, though Hassan can feel their resentment that every engagement they come to, they have to back away from.

Like this one. They cannot afford to hold ground and help the Hort troopers. They cannot clash with the XVI, or any other invaders, without risking losses. All they can do is protect themselves, evade, and move.

It feels like cowardice.

The Sons of Horus mow down the last of the Hort survivors. More than twenty of them have emerged onto the yard, and some are already firing at Hassan's party. The Astartes gunfire keeps them at bay, and a shot from Conort clips and drops one of the Horusian killers. The traitors' bolt-rounds smack into the cloister wall and columns, and the multiple detonations fill the hot air with stone dust. Raja opens an auramite hatch, and almost throws Hassan through it. The others follow. Kumo, bringing up the rear, fires a last burst at the advancing traitors, then ducks in, but not before clamping a charge onto the outside of the hatch as he closes it.

The directional charge, which goes off a few seconds later, brings down the cloister walk and buries the hatch in rubble. It is a trick Kumo has performed twice already. The White Scars are masters of mobile war. They go where they want, and are extremely adept at denying others the opportunity to follow.

Raja leads the party down a short corridor, out across a secondary yard, and into the base of one of the castellated watchtowers of the Southern Hem. The place seems empty and abandoned. There is a slow drift of filmy smoke in the air. Weapon discharges and explosions rattle, dull and muffled, from floors far below.

They find a sub-command station. The power is live, but all data seems corrupted. The vox wails like a Neptunian wind. The Astartes watch the door and the hallway approach. Hassan straightens an overturned chair and sits down.

What were you deliberating? Ire signs.

'I was trying to think how Xanthus would think,' Hassan replies. 'He could not compel Amon–'

'Agreed,' says Raja.

'But Amon went with them. And it wasn't for safety, because the Sanctum hadn't been penetrated at that point.'

As far as we know, signs Ridhi.

Hassan ponders. He would ordinarily request the Sisters to keep some distance, for the lead weight of their null souls clouds the mood and thinking of even non-psykers. But the uncanny stillness they impart now seems like a comfort, insulating him from the shock and throb of warfare ringing from the Palace around him.

‘So moving the prisoner must have been in accordance with Amon’s instructions,’ he says.

Which were to keep the prisoner contained and safe, say Ire’s hands.

Hassan nods. He looks at Raja for confirmation.

‘Just that?’ he asks. ‘Do you know Amon’s precise orders?’

‘To safely contain the prisoner and prevent his escape, pending the completion of the prisoner’s project,’ Raja replies.

‘Yet Amon refused to turn him over to the Sodality. We know that. And he consented to moving Fo, even though the secure holding cell was right there.’

Did he have reason to suspect the prisoner was not safe at that location? Ire asks.

‘Perhaps,’ says Hassan. ‘He must have believed he could not accomplish his orders to the letter by staying–’

He trails off. He looks at Raja, and the half-ghosts of the watching Sisters.

‘Accomplish his orders to the letter,’ he repeats. ‘Safely contain the prisoner, prevent his escape, and complete his project.’

As he speaks, he raises his thumb, index and middle finger in series to count off the items on the list.

‘Tripartite orders,’ Hassan says, ‘and only the third part of it seems pertinent. Fo had not completed his project. Or Xanthus, perhaps with the Selenar’s assistance, convinced Amon that the work was not yet completed. Amon would be obliged to take action to fulfil the third tier of his orders.’

Raja nods.

But if there was work remaining, the laboratorium was close by, signs Ridhi.

‘Then a workplace, and instruments… That wasn’t what was missing,’ muses Hassan. ‘Fo had been provided with everything he required, materially. So what was lacking must have been data. Information. Specialist knowledge that Fo needed to complete the weapon. Given what we know, that’s the only reason Amon would have consented to move him.’

Which is the nearest archive? Ire signs. *The nearest library?*

‘The Clanium,’ says Raja, without hesitation. ‘Leng and the Quorum are too far. There is a data-stack in the House of Templates, but its scope is too narrow and specialised.’

The Clanium, then? Ridhi signs.

‘Still a long way,’ says Hassan. ‘They left on foot, and were last seen on monitor descending to level six. If they had been heading for the Clanium–’

‘They would have gone up to the roof platforms and secured a flyer,’ says Raja.

‘I think so,’ Hassan nods.

‘I am certain,’ says Raja. ‘In Amon’s position, with Amon’s specific instruction, I would have obtained a flyer. I would not have attempted to walk the prisoner to the Clanium.’

Then where? asks Ire.

Hassan springs to his feet and crosses to the sub-command’s shuttered port. He thumbs the stud, but the power is low, and the metal shutters begin to grind upwards at a sluggish, reluctant pace. Raja joins him, and with one surly thrust of his arm, shoves the shutter up into its slot.

The window port is large, and affords a wide and lofty view across the southern part of the Sanctum. They are nine floors above the concourse of the Southern Hem, and forty-six above surface street level. The armoured glass of the port is speckled with soot.

Khalid Hassan blinks. He has never seen such devastation. He has never seen such *ongoing* devastation. He corrects his thinking. He has seen warzones, and he has seen battlefields. He’s seen cities brought to their knees. The hammer-blow shock of this vista is that it is the Sanctum. The eternal citadel is the one place, the one place in the entire Imperium, that should be safe from this. It is the inviolable heart of everything. It is the seat of power.

Yet it burns. It dies. Towers crumble, spires blaze. The streets, plazas and connective bridges below him, on descending levels, swarm with figures and motion. He sees diminished groups of loyalist soldiers bunched, cornered and surrounded, defending terraces, pushed back across skyways, locked behind makeshift barricades. The traitor mass is universal, pouring along every processional and thoroughfare, spilling through courtyards and squares. He sees their striding war engines, their cavalcades of tracked

armour, their billion nodding banners. The sky is solid smoke, spread low across the firelit ruin like a lid. The light throbs and flickers with the constant discharge of weapons, as many sparks and flashes as there are leaves in a forest or stars in the sky.

And everywhere, everywhere, the dead.

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8:xii

The unbearable

‘Grammaticus,’ Leetu says.

John opens his eyes.

Are we dead? he asks immediately, his hand trembling as he tries to form the code signs.

‘Worse,’ says Leetu. ‘We’re alive.’

Leetu seems unsteady with pain, his damaged biology trying to heal itself. His war plate is lacquered with dried blood.

John lets Erda’s wounded warrior haul him to his feet. Every part of him hurts, and the pain in his broken face and mangled arm is almost too much to bear. He is shaking, feverish. He has died enough times to know that this is what it feels like when a damaged body starts to shut down and quit. There isn’t very much of his final lifetime left.

And this isn’t how he wanted to spend it.

The Luna Wolf, Loken, is already on his feet. He is standing in the dust several metres away with his back to them. He is gazing at something, fixated.

The light is fierce, so bright it makes John nauseous. But there is no heat in

it.

He sees Oll, a good distance away, facing some tall and motionless figure, a blackened shape as rigid and imposing as an obelisk. There are others, upright and stark, like the aligned, time-worn stones of a standing circle. White dust billows in the glare. Far away, and all around, a silent curtain of lightning-storm rings the world, like a writhing, snapping wall of hanging chains.

Then John sees the thing he should have seen first. The giant thing that fills the space beyond Oll. It is so huge in scale and power, John knows his mind must have just blanked it when he first awoke, refusing to see it or accept it was there, for the sake of his wits.

A polished globe. An obsidian orb. A mirrored sphere. Its form is simple, but there is no simple way to describe it, not even with his linguistic command. It's hard even to say how big it is. It rests softly on the earth beneath it, yet it seems to be the size of a fallen moon. No, it's bigger than that, far bigger. He begins to sense the infinite depth of it, the span, the negative regression, and it makes him want to cry. It is not a thing at all, it is a force, a manifestation, a node of consciousness, a presence. It reeks of ylem, the primordial matter. It radiates an aura of blue light, *hsbd-iryt*, the first colour of the sky, the hue that the ancient hierophants of the Nile used to paint the skin of their gods.

It is, at once, both immeasurably calm and supremely enraged. Wrath seeps out of it like the fragrance of slow-burning incense, and that wrath has become fear by the time it touches John's skin.

It is unbearable. He wants to scream.

He wants to die.

Nearby, Loken kneels, and bows his head.

John shakes off Leetu's hands, and starts to limp across the dust towards Oll, each step taking him deeper into the glow of terror.

He keeps going, despite it. He's come this far.

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8:xiii

The only logical destination

Chosen?’

Hassan remembers himself. Raja is waiting.

‘Your assessment?’ asks Raja.

Hassan studies the panorama, trying not to linger, fixated, on individual details of carnage. It is hard to make sense of things. He knows this city. It’s his domain, and though it is immense, he could navigate every step of it without a map.

Yet it does not seem configured correctly. Beyond the fundamental damage, and the changes wrought to plan and skyline by destruction, the final fortress is not *right*. Landmarks seem to have moved, or been misplaced. Nothing seems to be in its correct position.

‘Chosen?’

‘Wait, please,’ he says, his voice unsteady. He scans again, then points. ‘The Retreat,’ he says.

‘Your Sigillite’s tower?’ asks Raja.

Hassan nods. The old tower, barely visible, is not where he would have expected to find it, but it stands yet. It seems, from where he is, a lifetime

away.

‘My master’s private library, and compendium of data, was extensive. A private collection, kept within his tower. That’s where Xanthus would go.’

‘Are you sure?’ asks Raja. ‘Or is this just a guess?’

Hassan looks at the Companion.

‘For the Chosen,’ he says, ‘it was a favourite place. We went there often, to meet with our master the Regent. To plan and discuss affairs of state in private…’

He stops talking. The memories are too many and too sudden.

‘It was a safe place,’ he says.

‘Nowhere is safe,’ says Raja.

‘Granted,’ says Hassan. ‘But it is where Xanthus would go. It is far closer than any other data facility, and its resources are considerable. Given what we know of the circumstances, that is the only logical destination. Xanthus would take Fo there.’

Instinct tells you this? Ire signs.

‘More than instinct. It’s what I would have done. It’s what any of the Chosen would have done.’

We will not make it on foot, signs Ridhi.

Raja turns back to the window port to consider their options. Hassan can almost see the multiple solutions cycling through the Companion’s mind, the routes and variables learned through exhaustive blood games. A direct approach, a descent to sub-surface to follow the deep processionals, an indirect advance following the causeway at–

Raja suddenly pulls Hassan away from the port. It is the most terrifying second of Hassan’s life, to see an indomitable warrior of the Legio Custodes recoil in apprehension. In fear.

Hassan feels the tower tremble. He hears the slow pulse of an earthquake, and realises it can only be footsteps. At the third titanic step, the armoured glass of the port spontaneously cracks.

Raja bundles Hassan towards the command room exit, the Sisters at his heels. As they pass through the hatch, Hassan looks back. He sees, for a split second, a shadow pass across the window port. Something, some behemoth thing nine storeys tall, is plodding past outside the tower. A war engine, an Imperator. He sees an eye as it peers in at the port. He feels as a doll would feel when an adult stoops to look into the windows of a child’s

toy house.

It’s not a Titan.

They start to flee down the corridor, the Astartes with them.

Behind them, masonry begins to come apart.

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8:xiv

Wrong about everything

You’re assuming the mantle of godhood,’ Oll says, ‘simply to destroy.’

‘To protect,’ the charred Custodian replies. ‘To defend–’

‘No,’ Oll snaps back. ‘To short-cut your way to another quick solution that disregards all later consequences. I’ve told you this before, so many times. You’ve never listened.’

He shrugs.

‘I suppose I shouldn’t expect you to listen now.’

He glances aside, and sees John limping up to join him. He reaches out to steady his miserably wounded friend. Leetu is close behind.

John’s one good hand moves, unsteady, forming words.

‘Yes,’ replies Oll. ‘It’s going exactly as well as I thought it would.’

John shakes his bandaged head wearily. His hand moves again.

‘No, John,’ says Oll. ‘There’s no need to apologise. This isn’t an “I told you so” moment. It was always worth a try.’

John can’t help but stare at the immense black sphere behind the burned-out Custodian. It looms over them in the fulminous, living light. He stares until he can’t bear it any more. He looks away.

‘It’s Him,’ Oll says. ‘We were wrong about everything.’

Holding John upright, Oll looks directly into the raddled face of Caecaltus Dusk.

‘Everything that is happening, everything, is a consequence of your Great Plan,’ he states emphatically. ‘This is on you, all of it. You were so proud of your configurations and your variations, but somehow you never saw this coming.’

‘And you did, Ollanius?’ Dusk asks.

‘Some of it. No specifics, but some of it. The risks, I suppose. But the thing is, old friend, I never claimed to be right about everything. I was too well aware of my own failings… my own ignorances. You… you were not. You were always so sure. You had ordained the future, and you were convinced that it would do as it was told. The future was yours, and it couldn’t get here fast enough.’

‘You will not chastise my King-of-Ages,’ says Dusk.

‘Then let Him chastise Himself,’ says Oll. ‘He made a plan, thousands of years ago. It was the most ambitious plan any human had ever conceived, infinite in its detail, profound in its scope. He believed in that plan absolutely, but not once did He consider that the plan itself was fundamentally flawed.’

‘He was always so sure of Himself,’ says Leetu quietly. Caecaltus Dusk turns his blood-blown eyes towards the injured legionary.

‘LE 2,’ he says. ‘You are in no position to question the merits of my king’s plan. You were created as part of it. The baseline prototype. An element of the plan does not get to question the plan.’

John’s hand shapes words.

‘That’s a fair point,’ says Oll. He looks at the proconsul. ‘Leetu can speak his mind because you allowed it. You allowed free will. You allowed emotional continuity. If the baseline model of the entire Astartesian generation, the pattern from which all others were devised, expresses doubt, what does that say?’

He sighs and points directly at the vast, shimmering sphere.

‘But this,’ Oll says, ‘this terrible thing you’re becoming… It ironically offers us one last chance at course correction. Strange as it may seem, it’s an opportunity.’

‘An opportunity?’ asks Caecaltus Dusk.

‘You are almost a god, Emperor. Take this moment to examine your plan, not as the man you have always been, but with the perception of a god. Surely you can see its flaws, and the errors of the configurations you so diligently fixed? A god might perceive the truth where a man cannot. The Dark King is not the solution. It is, like every repair you’ve made, the act of a restive mind. The Dark King is an existential disaster, but its saving grace is that it allows you a perspective you’ve never had before. Use it, I beg you.’

‘Horus must be stopped,’ says Dusk.

‘Agreed,’ Oll replies.

‘Chaos must be thwarted.’

‘Agreed.’

‘I cannot do it without this power, Ollanius.’

‘Yet you must. You must give it up. Think with the wisdom of a god, then act with the courage of a man. If you don’t, you will have become what you abhor. You’ll be no better than Horus.’

‘No,’ says Caecaltus Dusk. ‘My king–’

‘Yes.’

They look around. Loken has walked forward to join them. He has removed his helm, and is staring, without flinching, at the mirrored blackness. He kneels before it, head bowed, Rubio’s blade at his side, its tip in the dust. Traceries of blue energy writhe around the length of the exposed blade.

‘I am your servant, my Emperor,’ he says. ‘I am but a vessel of your strength. Like these men, I have come a long way to stand with you and fight the threat of Horus. On my journey, daemonkind, in its madness, showed me things I should never have seen. It revealed them to torment me. One of them was the scope of the trap my father had set for you.’

There is a faint crackle on the wind, the stirring of psykanic force, as though a great psychic power has effortlessly extended the merest, inquisitive fraction of itself. Rubio’s blade buzzes more fiercely.

‘So,’ says Caecaltus Dusk after a while, ‘this is the final snare he laid for me. Thus, the first-found has made a grave error.’

‘My father does not care,’ says Loken.

Dusk’s head turns with a snap of baked sinews and regards Loken.

‘No, Garviel Loken. Those conjoined powers that meet in him do not

care,’ says Dusk. ‘They do not care if Horus lives or dies, because he will have served his purpose as their instrument by dooming me. This was their goal from the very beginning.’

Loken rises to his feet and stares back at the proconsul.

‘If I renounce the power, all is lost,’ says Caecaltus. ‘If we fight as men, we will lose.’

‘Then we lose,’ says Loken. ‘Better to fight daemons as men, than become them.’

‘Sometimes we must renounce the things that are dearest to us,’ says Oll. ‘Fundamental things, things that feel imperative. If we don’t have the strength to adapt, then we have no strength at all.’

He smiles sadly, and reaches for the tiny golden symbol around his neck.

‘I have kept faith in a higher power,’ he says. ‘If that higher power proves wanting, then my faith is forlorn. I would rather recant it.’

He closes his eyes, head bowed. He lifts the little charm his wife left him to his lips and kisses it. John looks at him, wide-eyed. He reaches out an imploring hand.

‘It’s all right, John,’ Oll tells him with a melancholy smile. ‘Really. If faith permits the existence of gods like this, then there should be no gods at all.’

He breaks the thin chain, then hurls the charm away.

There is silence for a moment. Dust, and crumbs of time, sift down over them, falling like sawdust.

Caecaltus Dusk slowly stirs. With a dry creak, he begins to move. He takes one slow step forward, then another. The cured tendons of his right arm groan like old rope as he raises it and places his hand on Oll’s left shoulder.

‘You were ever the most stubborn and principled of those who came to me, Ollanius,’ he says. ‘Your counsel was always hard to square. You did not simply agree with me because of who I was. I disliked you for that. I dislike you for it now.’

‘Truth is often hard to hear,’ says Oll.

‘And harder to speak. From that, we may see its value. I have considered your counsel. I have, as you suggested, exercised the insight I now possess.’

‘You see the truth, then?’ asks Oll.

‘I see the danger.’

‘You see the future?’

‘No,’ murmurs the proconsul. ‘For there is none there. It is a blank,

waiting to be filled by a new plan.’

‘A plan that learns from past mistakes?’ asks Oll.

‘Any other form of plan would be idiocy. Man grows through learning, and learns through growth. A king, made wiser through revelation, sharpens that wisdom through good counsel. A man such as that has always stood beside the Golden Throne. A man who was not afraid to gainsay. A man who had infinite patience. You are rightly afraid of all things in this cosmos, Ollanius, including me. But you have never been afraid of the truth.’

Oll hears a sharp, chiming sound, like the crunch of glass or the fracturing of crystal. The blue aura pulses. The mirrored face of the great black sphere is beginning to shoot and feather with cracks, spreading and multiplying rapidly.

‘Perhaps, then, things will be as they once were,’ says Caecaltus Dusk. ‘But this must be resolved first, before any future can be contemplated. Let this be ended, and death be damned.’

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8:xv

A last repulse

‘Where is my Lord Lupercal?’ asks Abaddon.

‘Where *isn’t* he?’ Erebus replies, with a blissful grin.

Abaddon rests his sword against the Word Bearer’s throat.

‘Where is he?’

‘Ezekyle,’ says Erebus, unfazed by the blade and the pelting rain and the biting wind, ‘I come to you in peace, and you threaten me with violence?’

‘You have a second to answer, before I gut you.’

Erebus sighs. ‘You are such a disappointing soul, Ezekyle. So prosaic, I’ve always found. I wonder that your lord, my master, ever reckoned you so highly. The gods too, for they have marked you as special. You fret over detail, and ignore the wonder.’

‘Is that him?’ Abaddon snaps, and points angrily at the guttering and baleful dark star that shimmers above the rainswept horizon. ‘Is that why your kin flee in such mindless terror? Is that why those sons I’ve found are so broken-minded? What has he become?’

‘That is not him!’ Erebus laughs. ‘Our master, great Horus, is born anew. He is the vessel of Chaos admixed. He prepares his Court for the

ceremonies that will mark this ascension. This is a great day, Ezekyle. This is the fruition of everything we have worked for.’

‘Where is he?’ Abaddon snarls. ‘Where is the Court–’

‘It is here, brother,’ says Erebus. ‘It is this place. This realm is his Court, this world, this starless heaven, this reality. We are pilgrims here, guests at his coronation. He is, as we speak, making the first of the sacrifices to honour the gods and thank them for his apotheosis.’

‘Then what *is* that?’ Abaddon asks, pointing again at the menacing star.

‘That? That, Ezekyle, is the last glimmer of resistance offered by our foes. That is the False Emperor, trudging his way towards vainglorious defeat.’

Abaddon lowers his blade. He stares at the distant view, the shadowed orb half-veiled in voidmist and ridge-backed storm-clouds. The mere sight of it turns his stomach. He can smell the power, the fury, the malevolence.

‘It looks like more than a glimmer, Apostle,’ he says. ‘It looks like the tumult of an angry god.’

‘It very nearly is.’

Erebus nods. The idea seems to delight him. He comes closer to Abaddon, slides an arm around the First Captain’s shoulders, and drops his voice to a whisper.

‘Just now, Ezekyle,’ he says, ‘the False Emperor is the strongest being in our universe.’

‘What?’

‘Come now. You didn’t think this would be easy, did you? At what point in this war has anything been easy? We have struggled, and we have bled, because the goal was worth it. We damn the False Emperor for his lies and his arrogance, but we should never underestimate his power. Ever. You know this, brother. He is, and always has been, a creature of immense force. He built the Imperium, Abaddon. He is the Emperor. Just because we hate him, we shouldn’t forget that. None of us, not even Horus, could face him one-to-one. That’s why we have prosecuted this war the way we have, chipping away at his reserves, piece by piece, turning or taking those he loves and depends upon, blinding him, surrounding him, dismantling his walls brick by brick. He had to be weakened before he could be killed.’

‘But you just said he’s stronger now than–’

‘Hush and listen, Ezekyle. This siege, the final act, has pinned him and driven him, at last, into the open. It has forced him to fight. This strength

you see, and it is a most terrible strength… It is the last defiance of a desperate man. The False Emperor has drawn upon the power of the warp in order to confront our master, for Horus has been growing stronger all the while. He has consumed so much power, Ezekyle, he is ascending to… well, godhood, just as you say. And this will be his undoing.'

'How?' Abaddon breathes.

'If he keeps the power,' Erebus chuckles, 'if he holds onto it and uses it, then the Triumph of Ruin is secured.'

'I never pledged to secure the victory of the Chaos gods,' says Abaddon. 'That was not the oath we rallied to–'

'But it was, Ezekyle, it always was. You swore to serve the Warmaster, and this was always his intent. You don't get a say in it.'

In the distance, thunder rumbles.

'If that is truly the False Emperor, he will kill us all,' says Abaddon.

'Small price,' replies Erebus.

'How can you say that?'

'Because I think it unlikely. The False Emperor is no fool. He understands the doom inherent in the power he has obtained. If his intellect prevails, he will let it go. If his arrogance prevails, and well it might, he will retain it and devastate all that he holds dear, including himself. But if he lets it go… Oh, Ezekyle. If he lets it go, he will come to face the great Horus weakened and diminished. If he lets it go, he will be choosing death.'

Abaddon shakes off the Word Bearer's fraternal embrace. 'You did this…' he murmurs.

'No, no,' says Erebus. '*We* did this. All of us. I lit the spark, you led the armies. Horus framed the plan by which this victory has been accomplished. He built the trap, and it is sprung. Doom or death. The Emperor loses either way.'

'What do we do?' Abaddon asks.

'We rejoice, Ezekyle,' says Erebus. 'And we compose, with all haste, our forces for a final repulse. If the Emperor relinquishes this power, and decides to fight, he will rally what remains of his supporters to stand with him. The loyalist cause is in tatters, and greatly diminished, but they will fight to the end. Just as we would. We must prepare to protect the Court.'

Abaddon nods.

'My life for the Lupercal,' he says.

Far away, the sound of thunder has grown louder. The air splits with a cataclysmic detonation. The distant dark star breaks, vanishes, and is replaced by a brilliant flash of light. The radiance rushes outwards, until the entire landscape is stark white in the glare.

‘You see, Ezekyle?’ Erebus declares, laughing. ‘As I suspected. The Emperor has chosen death.’

Abaddon shields his eyes against the light.

‘The day will not save him,’ he says, ‘for we own the night.’

‘Oh, Ezekyle,’ says Erebus. ‘We own *everything*.’

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Fragments

The substance of creation shudders. Materia and immateria vibrate in shock. The electrons spinning around the protonic nuclei of every atom in the realspace universe stutter, and briefly cease to obey their mysterious quantum obligations. The power of the Dark King is expelled and scattered, pouring back into the empyrean from whence it came, carrying with it flotsam and jetsam: the broken prophecies and driftwood predictions that brought it hence. The Neverborn wail, en masse, their whispers turned in on themselves, twisted back into lies and cackled falsehoods; their future, so assured, suddenly untruthed. The malison of the Dark King passes from the material galaxy, and back into the simmering caskets of myth.

For this age, at least.

The despair of daemonkind is short-lived. As the glare spreads, and begins to fade, their distress turns to glee. They perceive another victory, not the Dark King's magnificent and absolute abolition, but still one they have long yearned for. The fall of mankind. The Triumph of Ruin. The investiture of Horus Lupercal as Empyreal Majesty. The binding of Chaos, undivided,

into one peerless vessel.

An end, and a death.

At the epicentre of release, figures stumble and fall in the searing flash of psychic power that bursts from the Master of Mankind. The light consumes them. Ollanius Persson, John Grammaticus, Garviel Loken and LE 2 tumble over in the dust, blinded, as the black mirror-shell of the sphere fractures and explodes. They fall in foetal positions, carried over by the avalanche of ejected power.

So does Caecaltus Dusk, hammered to his knees.

But the light does not kill them. In the last seconds of his godhood, the Emperor channels the force he is disposing. He does not do so out of sentiment or charity. He needs allies. He needs every last man. He cocoons those who have come to him in his aura, and lets it protect them against the ravening psychic winds. He cups them as gently as eggshells in his palm. This is not how they will die.

It is too late for the other Sentinels, those valiant warriors of the Hetaeron that he burned out in the extremity of his vastation. Their rigid bodies fly apart like kindling in the blast, scattering burned bones and scraps of armour, disintegrating in the out-rushing force until, afterwards, only scraps remain in the smoking dust, the vestiges of feet and lower legs, a shin, a knee, like the stumps of felled trees.

Too late for them. They cannot be brought back from death. But for the others, one final gift of life and renewal, the parting gift of an abdicating deity. Oll wakes in the billowing dust to find his countless aches and bruises gone, his weariness fled, his old uniform clean and new, his rifle as gleaming as it was when it was first manufactured. Loken rises to his knees, the terrible burden of his visions mercifully diluted to restore focus to his tortured mind. Leetu’s wound heals, the sheared armour remade. John, blinking, tears the bandages from a face no longer mutilated with a hand no longer useless. There is a pervading scent of osmogenesia, the blessing of the Emperor.

Caecaltus Dusk, the last Hetaeron, rises to his feet, his Aquilon war plate glinting, his bones re-fleshed, and his flesh restored. A bright sigil glows upon his chestplate.

He turns and sees that, where once doom sat, an aching black sphere, now

a figure stands alone, its cloak stirring in the wasteland wind, white dust eddying around it. A figure in gold plate. A king. His master.

Mere mortal now, divinity cast aside, but still a being of perpetual power.

The golden giant draws his warblade.

The last battle is near.

The releasing discharge of immaterial power spreads out, a rolling shockwave across the transmuted realm. Great tracts of the Inevitable City are wracked by the expanding empyric hurricane, and thousands of square kilometres of the transmundane sprawl are further disintegrated to dust and ash. The dissected and refabricated hulk of the *Vengeful Spirit* rocks in the swell on its psykanic moorings. In what material parts of Imperial Terra remain intact, every vox- and comm-system comes to life for a few moments to scream the shrill, magnetic death-hymn of condemned stars, and they continue to bleat and wail long after the shockwave has passed.

It is a venting of theandric energy, yes, an exhalation, a voluntary shedding of unwise potency. But it is also a call. Just as he turned a morsel of that expelled force into a salving benediction for those at his side, so the Emperor, with that same last measure of his divinity, turns another fraction of the psychic charge into a call to arms, a summons to all and any who are still alive to hear him and close enough to act.

In the fifty-ninth second of the fight, the steadfast star that has been guiding them blinks, stutters, and goes out.

Constantin does not see it disappear. He and his surviving warriors are halfway up a ravine of flesh that transects the rotting meatscape, assailed on all sides by leaping, squirming things that shrill like over-boiled kettles and hiss like punctured gas canisters. The savage momentum of the fight has not decreased at all. They are caked in stinking ooze, stabbing and bursting the Neverborn shapes that irrupt from the carrion cliffs around them, translucent horrors that rupture their way out of the blistered cliff-skin like hatching parasites, and spring at the Companions trailing mucus and long, cartilaginous tails. Most still have the membrane of their birth-cauls and egg-sacs clinging to them, ravenous from the instant of birth, intent on learning how to murder before they learn to walk.

Three of them bring down Diocletian Coros. Constantin leaps to his

tribune’s aid, hacking the writhing forms off him, wrenching at their soft, yolk-wet carapaces to break their grip. He feels, rather than sees, the star go out. He feels the instant of cold, and then the suffocating darkness engulfs them again, as deep, as impenetrable as before.

Blind turmoil follows, a sightless frenzy of impacts, liquid spatter, inhuman squealing and pain. They are lost, he thinks. They are lost now. He has gone, His light departed, and they will die in this forsaken gorge as hopelessly as they began.

Then a shockwave of light spills over them. It throws them all down, tumbling, and the hideous forms assaulting them disintegrate, screaming as the light discorporates them into a drizzle of liquescent filth.

The shockwave ebbs. As Constantin and his remaining Custodes climb to their feet, they can see fluttering tatters of cerulean ectoplasm and skeins of psychic residue carried overhead in the haze of light like torn linen.

Constantin starts to claw his way up the slope at the head of the fistuline trench, using his spear as a staff to steady his way. The others follow. He can hear something. A neurosynergetic murmur. A call.

A voice.

At the crest of the slope, the fleshy ground, fluted like the whorls of brain tissue, shelves down into a bleached wasteland of white dust and tumbled ruins, the way that shingle gives out into sand on a wind-drawn beach. Sections of the flagship’s blasted superstructure, metal rather than meat, jut out of the dust, and in places form archways or even partial ceilings. The sky, for there is now a sky, is a low swathe of voidmist, sickly green, and lightning zags and blinks along the low horizon.

He can hear the voice clearly. Simple, sweet words carved out of raw thought, echoing in his head. A summoning. A last call to battle, resolved yet plaintive. A war cry.

Those who may hear me, join me now.

Constantin glances at his companions, but he knows they are all listening too. He grips his spear and leads the advance.

They are sixty seconds into the fight.

Taerwelt Ikasati deflects the traitor’s sword, then drives his blade into his enemy’s chest. A killing stroke, but this Son of Horus refuses to die. Roaring, blood spraying from the filters of his helm, the traitor flails,

striking hilt and pommel against Ikasati's shoulder and head. The Blood Angel's sword is wedged fast, and he cannot pull it free, but he refuses to let it go, even to escape the battering close assault.

Finally, the blade unfixes, but it comes free so suddenly, Ikasati slips on the gore-wet deck. He slams onto his back. The Son of Horus, his war plate slick with blood, lurches forward to impale Ikasati before he can rise.

A bolt-round removes his head.

Raldoron hauls the corpse off Ikasati's legs. 'Alive, Sanguinary?' the First Captain growls.

'Still,' Ikasati admits as he gets to his feet.

The air is crimped with smoke, and every surface is splashed with blood. The calamitous fight is all but done, and the Great Atrium finally taken. The Blood Angels of Sanguinius' Anabasis company have cleared the chamber and miraculously prevailed against a far larger force of the Warmaster's best. The atrium is a ruined shell, piled with the bodies of the slain. Ikasati can't tell if they have killed all of their adversaries, or if some have managed to flee in the face of the IX's onslaught.

He marvels. The atrium was an enclosed killing space, and the enemy numbers huge. A single company, even of Blood Angels, should not have been able to triumph, but they have.

It was that, or die, thinks Ikasati. The simple arithmetic of desperation. They were never going to back off, or retreat, or fall back to fight another day when conditions favoured them better. Once they had committed, they fought until death stopped them, for there is no other day, and there never will be.

But Ikasati, bone-weary and carrying a dozen wounds, feels no pride in the accomplishment. Concern eclipses any glory. He knows Raldoron feels the same.

The inner hatches, which their primarch lord forced open, and which closed again as soon as Sanguinius passed through them, remain firmly sealed. The black adamantine, resolutely solid, seems to sneer at them.

'Open them!' Raldoron yells to Furio and his Terminators.

How long since their lord passed through them? Five minutes? Ten? An hour? Time has lost its form entirely. It feels, to Ikasati, that they have been fighting in this bloodied chamber for the whole of his life, an endless purgatory of carnage. How long has Sanguinius been cut off and alone?

Raldoron draws up the company, what remains of it, to prosecute the area beyond as soon as the hatches are open. A shield wall, with assault squads ready on its heels.

‘If they won’t open–’ Ikasati says.

‘They will open,’ Raldoron snaps.

‘But if they won’t–’

‘The Bright Angel opened them, Ikasati,’ Raldoron replies. ‘They can be opened.’

‘We are not the Bright Angel, captain,’ Ikasati replies, very calmly. It has always been his role to supply cool wisdom when others are overheated by combat or urgency. ‘The hatches opened for him, and then closed again, as though of their own will.’

‘A trap?’

‘This entire vessel is a trap,’ Ikasati says. ‘It is as deceitful as its master, and obedient to his vile will. We may be wasting our efforts. If there is another way through–’

Raldoron nods grudgingly. ‘I have Sacre’s men, and Maheldaron’s, scouring this chamber for other exit points. The bastard Sons of Horus that fled from us must have gone somewhere.’

‘My point, First Captain,’ says Ikasati. ‘We are fighting this ship as much as we are fighting aboard it.’

Raldoron makes to reply, but they are suddenly bathed in light. Some transmitted shock shivers the deck beneath them, and stirs the hanging smoke. It is unmistakably a backwash of fierce psykanic power.

And in it, far off, they both hear the Emperor’s call.

It is the first hint since their arrival on board that the Emperor is alive, let alone present.

‘He calls to us,’ Raldoron murmurs. ‘And if He calls, then He needs us.’

Ikasati catches his arm and points to the black hatches where Furio’s men are toiling and struggling. Though they are sealed fast, a thin glow of blue light is diffusing through the crack where the adamantine doors meet.

‘Get them open!’ Raldoron bellows, surging forwards. ‘Get them open now!’

There is always a voice calling her name. Suddenly, it is piercing.

Keeler gasps and collapses, falling against Sigismund. He catches her, and

cradles her. Some wave of tangled light, like the outwash of a distant detonation, sweeps across the advancing pilgrim column. It lifts dust from the cracked copper soil of the desert and flares across the low mantle of dark clouds above. As soon as it passes, thousands of the lost and dispossessed souls in the river of refugees begin to wail and cry out.

Beside them, Lord Zhi-Meng falls to the ground in a tonic-clonic fit, trying to weep with eyes that can no longer cry.

Sigismund ignores the mass of voices calling out and lamenting behind him. He lifts Keeler up, and lays her on the track guard of the nearest armoured vehicle. She stirs, and her eyelids flutter open.

‘Did you hear that?’ she asks, her voice fragile.

‘Yes,’ he replies.

‘He called out, and then His voice fell silent.’

‘Yes,’ says Sigismund. ‘He called for help.’

He wants to comfort her, but he doesn’t know how comforting works. What comfort can be conveyed by a plated gauntlet? He can’t even comfort himself. He has never felt so detached from things, so remote, so far away from the battles and moments that matter.

He has never felt so estranged.

A call comes in from Huscarl Artolun, leading the outriders at the head of the pilgrimage. Sigismund looks up, his visor increasing magnification in a series of rapid, leaping resolutions.

A force is gathering ahead to block their path. Two kilometres out, at the foot of a bank of ragged, amber mesas. It’s half-hidden by the desert haze, but it’s brigade strength at the very least. That strength is waiting for them, patient and confident in its ability to stop and slaughter them all, no matter their teeming numbers.

It is an army of Traitor Astartes. Sigismund sees their lank and obscene banners swaying in the wilderness wind.

Death Guard.

On the last day of his last year in the desert, the star goes out.

He doesn’t know, or care, how long he’s been there, or how many centuries have trickled past. Time seems to have slipped away from him, like sand through an hourglass, as though all this sand in all this desert surrounding him has trickled away. Time has taken everything away with it:

his purpose, his self, the lustre of his armour, even his name.

But when the star goes out, it seems to mean something. It has been his only companion for the longest time, a steadfast thing that kept him going all the while it shone.

Now it has disappeared, and there is just him, and the wall, and the desert.

He gets up, and steps out of the shadow under the wall. He stares at the sky. The star's gone. It hasn't moved, or set. It has simply vanished. That signifies something. His slow, tired thoughts recognise that much. The star was there, and now it's gone, and that means something.

He isn't sure what. But he feels it means more than the red's dry and constant whispers that seep at him through the wall every hour of every day. Those words are meaningless, the din of war that sometimes also comes is meaningless too. But the star…

His sword had long since worn away. He uses his fingertips now, steadily eroding the plasteel tips and knuckle guards as he scratches his plans on the wall. Another plan. Then another. They never seem to be quite right. He can't remember what he is supposed to be planning for.

The only thing that doesn't seem to have worn away is his need. His need to let go. To give in. To finish the sentence that the whispers behind the wall keep urging him to complete.

Who is the blood for? Just say it.

He wants to. It would be so easy. He wouldn't need a plan then. He wouldn't have to plan anything. Just say it, and give in, and let go.

It's so very tempting.

He thinks, in fact, that he might finally say it today. What has he got to lose? He can't remember, but it can't be much. He was going to say it, but then the star went out, and that seemed to matter. It unsettled him. Any change is unsettling, for so very little has changed over the centuries.

He sighs, confused that he doesn't quite know why he is confused. He clambers back into the cool shadow under the wall, and crouches down. He starts to scratch out another plan. The gauntlet on his right hand is beginning to fall apart, rivets lost and mail-links frayed. One more plan. One more. Maybe the star will come back?

One more plan.

He starts his recitation again.

'Around that time, it was written, in the Ethics of the Nicomach, that "we

make war that we may live in peace". This simple framework for the morality of justified war–'

The whispers start up again, hissing and growling from the other side of the wall. He smiles. It still amuses him how annoyed the red gets when he talks this way.

He is about to continue when the whispers change. He feels giddy, as though some shock has passed through him. He blinks, and realises that the whispers have cut off, as suddenly as the star went out.

There is another voice. It's a different voice, not the whispering one. It's soft at first, and he senses that it's not soft because it's quiet, it's soft because it's coming from far away. It's not something crouched on the other side of the wall, hissing at him through the stone. It is far more distant than that, though it is coming through the wall.

He frowns. He thinks he recognises it. It feels like a voice he knows, a voice he's heard before. He's not sure where. It seems to be calling to him for help.

But he can't help. He can't get through the wall. Maybe it doesn't matter.

Maybe–

Maybe if he makes a new plan, it will show him how to get through the wall. Or over it. Or something. He starts to pick and scratch again, clawing with his fingertips. No more recitation now. There are no more whispers to annoy.

This, he thinks as he scrapes his fingers until they bleed, this *will be*. One of these plans, one of these schemes, *one* of them will work. Maybe this one. I will break out and run, like so. I will be somewhere else. I will be able to hear the voice properly, and understand what it wants. Maybe I will be able to help. There will be other people there, waiting for me. These are the weapons they will be carrying. This – as his fingers move from scratched line to scratched line – this will be the path I will follow to escape. This is where it will end, this cross here. This will be my destination–

The plan seems no more viable than any of the other millions he has made. He gouges the final cross – a simple X – anyway, just to finish the plan before attempting another.

The stone wobbles as he makes his mark upon it.

He touches it again. It rocks very slightly, like a loose tooth. He pushes it

harder, stirring it in its place. Dust puffs out around it.

This is where it will end, this cross here.

He feels his heart rate rising, abruptly, for the first time in centuries. He starts to claw at the stone, scrabbling with both hands, working to prise it free. It is set stubbornly, for the wall has always been stubborn. No stone in it has ever shown signs of movement or flaw.

He balls his fist, and hammers at it until his hand hurts, then he claws again, working around the edges of the block, trying to find the fissures and seams, trying to locate the hidden weakness that makes it wobble. Something, somehow. He'll find it. He'll find a way to break it. He'll find a way through. He's suddenly sure that's the thing he's good at.

He claws. He punches the stone. He rakes at it, until his exposed fingernails are torn and peeling, and blood drips.

The block comes loose. It just suddenly gives, tumbling out into his hands. His cross is still marked upon it.

He looks at the hole he's made. A shaft of light is beaming through it, the light of somewhere else. He can hear the voice more clearly, louder, calling to him. Calling for help.

He reaches into the hole, coughing at the dust that billows up, and tries to tug away the blocks either side of the one he has pulled out. The wall is as stubborn and strong as ever.

But so is he. Strong as ever. Strong as his father–

He wrenches with all the grip and force he can muster. Blocks slide out. Two, then three. Light pours in across him, piercing the shadow under the wall where he has sheltered. More blocks fall away. There's dust everywhere. He realises, almost too late, that the wall is giving way, and he stumbles back to avoid being buried in the collapse.

A section of the wall caves in with a rumble and clatter of freed stone. Blocks thump and bounce in the sand around him.

He doesn't hesitate. He clambers over the rubble, stones still falling, and heaves himself through the gap.

On the other side, he stands for a moment, uncertain. Dust swirls around him like smoke. Behind him, a great deal more of the wall subsides and collapses.

It's cold here. He can no longer hear the voice, but it doesn't matter, because he remembers what it said. The sky is low, and heavy, and grey.

There’s no desert any more, just rubble and broken stone. It’s a city. It’s a city, somewhere. He doesn’t know its name.

But he knows other things, things that were walled up and hidden from him. He remembers things he used to know, things that used to be important, and perhaps are now important again.

He says the first of them aloud.

‘I am Rogal Dorn, Praetorian, primarch of the Imperial Fists, seventh-found son, defiant and unyielding.’

The close darkness trembles. A tremor runs through the floor, and several old volumes tumble off nearby shelves so suddenly, it makes the archivist cry out in fear.

Mauer glances at Sindermann. They see the anxiety in each other’s eyes. Collection 888 is deep-buried beneath the Hall of Leng, in the foundations of the Sanctum Imperialis. If they’ve felt a tremor down here, the whole Palace must have shaken.

Ahriman gasps abruptly, making the poor archivist start again. The sorcerer is muttering to himself. He seems perplexed and uneasy.

‘What?’ asks Mauer. She’s not afraid of him any more, not really. Nothing compares to the terror of the future he has revealed to them. Nothing matters any more.

‘Something,’ Ahriman says, his mind racing elsewhere. ‘Something just changed. A reversal. A shift.’

He looks at them sharply, his blue eyes fierce.

‘Did you hear that?’ he asked.

‘No,’ says Mauer.

‘Hear what?’ Sindermann asks.

Ahriman ignores them. He looks back at the reading table and, lips drawn back from his black gums, hisses through his teeth. The sound makes all the cards fly up into the air in a long, rippling arc. They land, one by one, in his outstretched palm. Another nod makes them flutter and shuffle themselves in his open hand.

Wordless, Ahriman begins to deal another spread, face up. Each card lands on the tabletop, perfectly aligned. It is the same disastrous spread as before, though now, as it seems to Sindermann, some of the pictures seem to shift and move, as though alive. His skin crawls. Despite the thorough shuffle,

the order is inexorable. *The Harlequin* of discordia, *The Eye*, *The Great Hoste, The Shatter'd World*, *The Labyrinthine Path*, *The Throne* reversed, *The Hulk, The Moon, The Martyr, The Monster, The Lightning Tower*, and *The Emperor.*

Ahriman turns the last. It is no longer *The Dark King*, the twin of the Emperor's card.

It is the indicator of fast-approaching loss for the Imperium of Man. *The Despoiler.* The unequivocal symbol of ending.

The shockwave spills out across the whole world. It bathes Terra in its churning fury and, for a brief moment, the sky is as bright as day.

It boils through the choked heavens above the final fortress, frothing the immense pall of smoke with its sickly aurora. In the stricken Sanctum below, few notice it pass. They are too far gone, too deeply enveloped in the brutality of the last battlefield. Those still true to the Emperor are fighting for their lives, their backs to irrelevant walls, their faces bloody, enduring daemonic wrath and sleeting las-fire, as they make war with the last broken fragments of courage they can salvage. Their screaming foes, a great host, are too blind with rage and glee, berserk in their psychopathic lust.

But most feel it. A prickle of the skin, an ache in the soul, a nameless sense of dread that sweeps upon them suddenly where there seemed no greater capacity for fear. It spurs some to even more intense effort, firing the resolve of loyal warriors, or goading the murderous thirst of traitors. In others, it triggers despair. Some simply fall, stone dead.

The Neverborn hordes feel it the most keenly. They shriek and convulse as it passes, burned by the invisible wind. Some weep tears of blood, others de-manifest entirely, their forms rendered back to empyric foam. But they bear the agony, and delight in it, for the pain they suffer will be brief, and the triumph it heralds will be eternal.

The Emperor has forsaken his last advantage. He has squandered his only chance. It is no longer a case that he must die. Now, he *will*.

Vulkan feels the earth sway beneath his feet. He feels the rock of the world, that mineral strength he has always trusted, unsteadied. He looks up, and sees the great electro-flambeaux of the Throne Room swing on their long chains.

‘What was that?’ he asks. Those around him hurry to discover the answer. Fear has choked the adytum chamber, a swollen, coiling, living thing that, though silent, seems louder than the screams of those tithed to the Sanction. The caskets containing the psycho-able are still being brought in, but there are very few left. The reserves are all but exhausted.

‘An energetic pulse of unscalable strength, my Lord of Drakes,’ says Abidemi as he rejoins his primarch clutching a transcript from the Concillium adepts. ‘It shook both materia and immateria–’

‘Source?’ asks Vulkan.

‘Unknown, my lord.’

‘Nature?’

The Draaksward shakes his head sadly.

Vulkan whispers a curse. He is tired of not knowing. ‘What did it say?’ he asks.

‘Say, my lord?’ Abidemi replies. ‘How do you mean “say”…?’

‘It felt like a voice,’ says Vulkan. ‘A great cry, bidding me to… to…’

He falls silent. Casryn and the proconsul Uzkarel are approaching.

‘Enemy forces are reported within a kilometre of the adytum,’ the proconsul says simply.

‘Prepare for repulse, proconsul,’ Vulkan says. He pauses, then smiles sadly at Uzkarel. ‘My apologies, Sentinel,’ he says. ‘That order was redundant. I know full well you have been ready forever.’

Uzkarel nods, a tiny mark of respect.

‘We will prepare for repulse, my lord,’ he says.

The adepts make further report, my lord, Casryn signs. *The empyric anomaly they have been monitoring–*

‘What of it?’

It is gone, her hands say. *It vanished, or dissipated, nanoseconds before that shockwave.*

Vulkan stares at her, waiting for her hands to tell him more.

They cannot explain it, she signs.

Vulkan draws a deep breath and strides away from them.

‘My lord?’ Abidemi calls out after him.

As he strides towards the heat of the Throne, Vulkan raises his warhammer and sets it, ready, across one shoulder. He comes as close as he dares to the inferno, closer than is prudent. He stares up at the tiny, immolating figure

on the Throne, squinting against the glare.

‘Hold on,’ he whispers. ‘Hold on, I beg you. Hold on with whatever will you have left. Just a little longer, Sigillite. That’s all he needs. You heard him too, didn’t you? I know you did. You heard him too.’

I heard him too. Half-blind with pain, I heard him, and I saw him.

I see Vulkan below me, at the foot of the steps, calling up at me. I see his mouth moving, but I cannot make out his words.

But I heard my King-of-Ages, so very far away. I heard his summons. It was as urgent as a solar flare and as clear as glass, a resonating echo that must surely have been heard by the farthest star.

It fortifies me. It makes me focus what little I have left. If he can show such courage, then so can I.

So can I.

Such courage. Such preternatural strength of will. Such a terrible choice to make, what dear Rogal would call a ‘lose/lose scenario’. He gave it up, that power, that… divinity. I don’t know why, or if there even was some particular cause or motivating reason. Perhaps my old friend simply recognised it was too much. But no one can ever doubt his commitment to the species.

He had that power, that impossible strength, and he cast it away. It was the only way, the only possible way, to guarantee the first-found’s defeat, but it was also a supreme curse. The Dark King would have won this day, and then lost everything, ever after. So the once-god Emperor must fend for himself, alone.

There is no certainty, no surety. I fear he will lose. I have seen the Lupercal, and I know the power he commands. I doubt anything can halt him now.

It would have been so easy to use that theandry, to wield that certainty. To own the power of a god, and bow Horus to his knees, to crush him entirely and end his menace. But that certainty was also doom.

Better one doom than another, I suppose. Better the devil you know, and we know this devil Lupercal too well. Better to die trying than fail in success. In such positions, the ‘lose/lose’, Rogal was always so calm. When there was no good choice, he would assess, and choose the least bad, and leverage it into triumph. Sometimes, that meant accepting the appearance of

defeat, a battle lost, and only years afterwards would a positive outcome become apparent. Rogal played the long game. How long will this one last? I wonder. ‘Defeat,’ he used to say, ‘is only defeat if you accept it.’

I wonder if my old friend is at last beginning to learn from his sons. I remember, at first, he thought there was nothing they could teach him. They were merely instruments he had made, tools fit for purpose, proxies that could labour and suffer on his behalf. They were made to spare him effort and pain. He told me that the primarch sons had been born to bear his worst experiences in his stead. It seems heartless to think of it that way now, but I am at death’s gate and I do not have the strength to frame my thoughts in a more tactful fashion. I can only be blunt and honest. They were meant to die for him, if the need arose.

But they have grown. They are more than instruments now. For better or for worse, they have flourished, each in his own way, according to the properties, characters and free will my king allowed them. They have walked their own paths, in their own ways, and carved their own legacies, some for the benefit of man, others to the detriment of all. Each one of them, in the end, has become his own person.

There is much to admire in them, even the very worst of them, who reneged on the bonds of blood and turned against us. Such is the way with sons. They are shining souls and, latterly, I think my king has come to recognise that. They have much to teach us. Even a father can learn from his children. The restless fortitude of Jaghatai. The cunning of Alpharius. The confidence of Roboute. The dauntless heart of Mortarion, afraid of nothing, not even death. The way that Russ trained anger to be utterly loyal, while Angron enslaved anger so it could not master him. The patient resolve of Rogal, willing to make, abandon, and remake his plans, again and again, over and over, until he has refined the one that will work, unafraid to redraft and change his scheme.

Yes, I think my old friend has learned that at least. He has learned, from his Praetorian son, that there is always a better plan, and that patience will lead you to it.

For my King-of-Ages has done more than divest himself of godhood. In that shockwave of warp light, I saw something else, something perhaps only I was in a position to see. He has cast aside a fragment of himself.

My lord and friend has broken off a part of his soul. He has amputated that

portion of himself that contains almost all of his hope, loyalty and compassion, for such things will become a hindrance when he faces the Lupercal. Those qualities might stay his hand, or make him hesitate if he is ultimately obliged to kill.

And if he is obliged to kill his son, then those qualities would afterwards, and inevitably, drive him to self-hatred and regret, and condemn him to the same, embittered path as Horus. He has excised those precious human aspects to further steel himself against the pain of what will come after, and the mandatory atrocities he will have to countenance in order to rebuild the Imperium. He has set those frail and cardinal virtues adrift on the tides of the empyrean so that they will not immobilise him.

And in the hope that one day, he will be able to reclaim them, and be whole again.

I watch that jettisoned fragment as it drifts into the void, just one more spark from this world-bonfire. All his hope, his mercy, his grace, his love, cast into the lightless tracts of space and time. That fragile asterism will, as cosmic ages turn, slowly grow by a coalescence of emotion and belief, just as the powers of Chaos grow.

It luminesces briefly, just a speck of hermetic fire against the shrouded pinpricks of the Milky Way, like an infant sun or a child star, and then it is gone, and lost from view.

I am profoundly struck by his sacrifice. I would weep if I could. I would weep for my friend. He has done what is necessary for the greater future, and left himself ready for this atemporal moment. I see him still. I can just make him out. His steadfast radiance has occulted. It has dimmed and almost gone, but he is shining still. He is hardened for war, a joyless aspect, a figure of pitiless gold, more ready for the callous needs of this ending than ever he was when he rose in majesty from the throne.

He strides, relentless and resolved, towards the final meeting.

The hurtling maul catches the Angel across his left pauldron, and turns him in the air. A glancing blow. Sanguinius goes with the momentum, and lands in a sliding stance, ready to loft again before the enraged first-found can heft a more accurate blow.

But the impact of his agile landing is echoed by a deeper, more profound tremor that rattles the deck plates. A pressure-wave of light bursts through

the Court, briefly banishing the shadows of the debased cathedral, and silencing the daemon whispers. The light glints across Horus and, caught off guard, he staggers back two paces.

The light passes and fades as fast as it came, but they have both heard the cry woven into it.

Horus Lupercal straightens up. He scowls, and spits bile-black blood. Sanguinius is smiling at him.

‘He is coming,’ Sanguinius says. ‘You could not mistake that voice, or its intent.’

‘Let Him,’ the Warmaster growls back.

Sanguinius flies at him with such sudden and ferocious speed, Horus Lupercal has barely time to move. The Angel rains blows upon him, across his head, his throat, his chest. *Encarmine* cleaves the Warmaster’s scalp, opens the line of his jaw, and severs the bunched pipework at the base of his neck. Blood hoses out, jetting into the stale air, and Horus roars as he stumbles aside. Sanguinius allows no time for respite or riposte. He swings his peerless blade with both hands in a wide and scything slice that rips through Lupercal’s midsection, and opens plate, sub-armour, flesh and meat down to the bone. Horus sinks onto one knee, panting and gasping, as steam and pitch-black blood pumps out of him. Entrails protrude. Haematemesis chokes him.

‘Stay down,’ says Sanguinius, sword raised. ‘Do you want to be alive to greet him, or would you rather be spared that shame?’

Horus aspirates blood; a cough or a laugh, it is hard to tell which.

‘Stay down, brother,’ Sanguinius urges. ‘Out of my love for you, I will grant you a measure of mercy. Please. I can make it quick and painless.’

‘There is no mercy here,’ says Horus Lupercal.

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8:xvii

Until we meet again

It wasn’t supposed to end like this. You, on your knees, eviscerated, gasping for breath. Him, standing over you, so noble and just, his sword raised in both hands, ready to strike.

Sanguinius looks down at you, over his raised shoulder. A fractional pause, space enough for a last chance. You see the pity in his gaze, the sorrow, the longing. He’s still hoping for a different answer.

He won’t get one.

You can see his disbelief. You can see him thinking, *It wasn’t supposed to end like this*.

Time’s up. The pause ends. He brings the sword down. He’s so fast, you don’t even see it coming. The perfect execution stroke. The most precise, most merciful, most important sword-stroke he will ever deliver.

But it will not land.

Worldbreaker’s haft stops *Encarmine* dead.

The jarring shock travels back through the blade, through his arms, and through him. It jolts him backwards even as the sparks of contact are still dancing.

Astonishment blinks in his eyes.

He swings again, a hastier blow, his arms like lead from the trauma of the blocking impact. Your Talon fends the blade away.

Now he tries a lancing thrust fuelled by mounting desperation. You catch his sword against the head of your maul, and flip the stroke aside.

That look on his face. It's gratifying. He can't believe you're on your feet. He can't understand why your wounds aren't slowing you down. He can't comprehend where your fluid speed is suddenly coming from.

It was always there. You're just not holding back any more.

You let him come at you. Blow after blow, each one a death stroke, each one an exemplar of the swordsman's art. Even in despair, his talent doesn't abandon him. None of them work. You bat them away as they come, with maul, then Talon, then maul again. You want to give him a moment to let the despair really sink in.

It wasn't supposed to end like this. That's what he thought. Well, it was never going to. You relished the challenge, but the contest is over.

You can see he understands this. Besides, he has demonstrated that he isn't going to change his mind either. He won't bend to your will. You thought he might, but he won't. Such a pity. Such a waste.

And so ungrateful. You offered him everything. Everything. He spurned you. He declined your gift. Graceless, thankless wretch. No one does that to you.

Neither of you is playing any more. You don't think he ever was, not really, not the way you were, but there was still a sense of restraint, as though his abiding belief in you was pulling his blows in the hope that you might repent.

Whatever may have been the case, he's not playing now. He's bent on killing you. For real. He wants to kill you more than he wants to save himself. He is attacking, not defending. It appears he still thinks he's invincible.

He is not. He is nothing like invincible and nowhere near invulnerable, as he is about to discover. The prophecy stands. The dreams were real. Your favourite brother should have heeded them. Fate is ordained, and it demands payment. Everyone pays, Sanguinius, some in a moment, some for the rest of their lives. There are no loopholes, no exceptions.

He thought he'd found a sub-clause in the logic of fate's contract that

would allow him to live. The dreams told him, plainly, that he would die the day he faced you, but he convinced himself that this did not count as a day. It couldn’t be a day, for time had ground to a halt, and thus the prophecy could not be fulfilled. This casuistry has worked for him before. He has used it to deny fate several times, perhaps more times than any other son. He thinks he can do it again.

Well, fate has grown tired of his prevarications. It is no longer charmed by his constant, clever escapes and dialectic evasions.

And so are you. There is no intellectual technicality to exploit here. Sanguinius is naive if he thinks that fate works that way, especially at this macrocosmic level.

This is the day. The final day. Days, like brothers, come in different types, with different qualities. They do not all have to work together and run in series, seriatim. A day can be alone, and singular.

This is your day. You have decreed its dimensions and its duration. It is a single day of days, endless and eternal, and nothing can outlast it.

No matter how hard it tries.

Here he comes, *Encarmine* gleaming. He still thinks he’s going to win.

You dodge the blade. You swing *Worldbreaker*. He evades, but you hadn’t intended for the maul to hit him anyway. The swing was just to scare him into the air. He takes flight, white wings wide, a flash of gold to encircle you and strike you down from above. He trusts in his one advantage: the ability to fly, and turn a two-dimensional fight into a three-dimensional assault.

But what are his three dimensions compared to the multitude you command?

He soars above you, a vertical ascent. You reach along the eighth angle of space and grab. Your Talon closes around his trailing ankle. His climb arrests with a brutal jolt. For a second, he is anchored in the air.

You bring him down hard, swinging him by the leg, like a hammer, into the deck. You let time slow so you can relish every detail of this moment.

Watch–

His wings brushed up around his arms as the air pushes them forward. The slow swirl of his hair around his face. The tiny, jagging cracks on his golden shin-guard as it splinters between the scissoring Talon. The feathers torn loose by shearing wing-load, floating end-over-end in the air as he

leaves them behind. The ‘o’ of his mouth. The clutching left hand. The shock in his eyes as they slowly stretch wide. The dilation of his pupils.

The impact.

The fragmentation of the deck plates under his shoulders, head and back. The sick bone-crack of his right wing as it is crushed between his body and the floor. *Encarmine* jarring from his right hand. The ripple of concussion that travels through his body as it makes contact with the deck. The strained rictus of his features as he absorbs the blow. The furrowed squeeze of his clamping eyes. The angled trajectory of a shorn deck-bolt punched clear of the deforming plates. The compression of golden wargear as it flexes and ruptures along multiple joints and seals. The almost drunken wobble of his head as it rebounds from the deck and oscillates with the transmitted whiplash. The sudden slackening of his facial muscles, the blanking loss of expression as he blacks out, the unflattering ripple of his softened cheeks.

The sword *Encarmine*, falling slowly, pommel first, striking the deck beside him, bouncing, striking again, each bounce sending a shivering undulation along the up-angled blade.

The clatter as it comes to rest.

The languid, upward spray of blood from his mouth and nostrils.

The gleaming droplets in the air.

The individual splashes as they fall back to dapple his face and throat. The slow, sideways loll of his head into the cushion of his tangled hair. The leak of blood from between his parted lips.

The stillness.

You gaze down at him. He lies on his back, full length in a crater of mashed deck plates, one wing spread wide, the other pinned and folded under him, his arms draped open, his hair a golden halo behind his head, one leg bent like a dancer’s.

You are still holding his other leg, like a haft to wield him by. You let go of his ankle. The leg falls, heavy and straight.

No more flying.

You step back. Your heart is racing. The satisfaction was exhilarating. You weigh *Worldbreaker* in your hand, ready and waiting. How long will it take him? A minute? Two?

No, less. His eyes blink open. He doesn’t realise where he is for a moment. He doesn’t know what’s going on. The impact has knocked all sense from

him, and he'll register the pain before anything else. That wing's broken. Ribs too. The ankle you swung him by. Pain will be flooding him as he wakes. You see him wince, a convulsion of his chest, his face screwing up in a grimace. He chokes, coughs blood. It dribbles off his lips.

Is he done? Surely, he's done. Nobody–

You give him some credit, grudgingly. He's not giving up. He tries to roll onto his side, but the grinding pain of the broken wing stops him. He flops back. He rolls the other way. He tries to rise.

He makes it onto his hands and knees. He gropes for his fallen sword. It's just out of reach, along with most of his broken hopes and the memories that were smashed out of him.

Go on. Get up. Let's see if he can. Hunched over, broken wing dragging like a limp ermine cloak behind him, he crawls. He makes no sound. Not one whimper or groan of pain. That's impressive. You balance *Worldbreaker*, ready.

He's found the sword. He clutches it tightly by the grip, breathing hard, and uses it, tip down, as a support as he drags himself upright.

And he's up. He's standing, though awkwardly, keeping his weight off that shattered ankle. He's panting like a dog, chest heaving. He wipes the blood from his mouth.

For a second, you want to offer him the chance to submit. He extended you the same courtesy, so it only seems fair. But this is your Court, and you decide what's fair. This is your house. You are a man of your word, and you told him there would be no mercy.

So there will be no mercy.

He turns to look at you.

You are already descending on him, bringing the maul down.

Somehow, he avoids it. *Worldbreaker* kills another section of the deck. He's swinging *Encarmine* at your head. The Talon parries it. Sparks fly. You sweep *Worldbreaker* at him, but he deflects it with a cross-body slash. You lunge to seize him by the throat. He evades the snapping Talon, and thrusts his blade around your guard. You knock it away before it bites.

He's got a little left. A little strength. A little speed. More than you expected. He deserves his fame. You exchange blows, trading four in rapid succession, each one parried or hooked aside. Oh, he's good. Even now. Still trying. Death has brought out the best in him.

Maybe, despite everything, he still thinks he’s invincible.

You will disabuse him of that notion. You slam your lethal claws around him to crush him–

He isn’t there. He’s slipped aside, a flash of gold, as fast as a sunbeam, evading you at the speed of light.

But you, you move at the speed of darkness. You catch him on the backswing, your Talon shearing locks of his hair, and snapping his head sideways. *Worldbreaker* does the rest. It hits him just above the hip, folds him double, and hurls him across the Court like a doll. He flies, one last time.

His spinning body strikes the ornate prayer screen of your private chapel. The fretwork, carved from solid diorite without any trace of toolmarks, smashes as he goes through it. Small splinters of stone clatter to the deck.

You follow him. You walk over to the side chapel slowly. There’s no reason to hurry. The bladed head of your maul is matted with blood and golden hair.

You walk past the shattered screen to the entrance, and look in. He has landed, face down, on the cool stones of the floor, his feet towards you, his head towards your altar. There are pieces of broken fretwork all over the floor around him, and his body has knocked over three metal stands of votive candles. Smoke trickles up from the fallen candles that have gone out.

There are a hundred thousand other candles in here, on other stands, on the floor, in niches, and on ledges. Their flames gutter and flicker as you enter the shrine, your mass stirring the air.

You see him move. The injury you have done to him is catastrophic, and it has also torn open the old wound, the one Angron inflicted. Blood is pooling under the Angel in a wide scarlet mirror. You see him shudder as he tries to lift his head, and his arms spasm as he tries to raise his shoulders and his chest.

He won’t be getting up this time.

When he raises his head, shaking and weak, the altar is the first thing he sees, right in front of him. You see him recoil at the sight of it. He can’t help but stare, his chest lifted on bent arms, his body trailing flat, like a supplicant prostrate.

The altar is wrought of predynastic dacite and Cthonic haemaquartz. You

had it intricately inscribed with syncretic sigils: entwined figures of concordia and discordia, of chronos and kairos, the form of the ouroboros, and the abstract convolutions of the eternal labyrinth, which has no way in and no way out. You have also had it etched with certain phrases and texts that the whispers of the Court have told you are sacred. It has eight wide steps, like a ziggurat, with a pyramidion of alchemically tempered azoth at the apex. You have placed many candles and tapers on the shelves of the steps, crowded around the relics you display there. They are skulls, each one ritually arranged face out, so that their empty orbits stare at anyone who enters the chapel. There are thousands of them, some old, some fresh, some brown with time, some white as snow. Most of them are human.

One is set centrally, in pride of place. It is the one Sanguinius sees first when he lifts his trembling head. Its gaping sockets gaze back at him. The yellowed bone of its brow is carved with the numeral X.

This is where it will end, this cross here.

You hear the Angel murmur, a single, wretched gasp.

‘Manus.’

It’s the only sound he’s uttered since you began to kill him.

You stand behind him. You give him a moment to appreciate the reunion. And to realise what it signifies.

Until we meet again.

That’s long enough.

‘Who lacks now, brother?’ you ask. He tries to turn over and face you.

You grasp him by that broken ankle and drag him out behind you. He slides backwards on his belly, hands raking and pawing at the bloody flagstones to resist, but there is nothing to grip. He leaves a long smear of blood on the floor behind him.

It isn’t supposed to end like this.

Nevertheless, it does.

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Only war

Frenzy.

That is all that remains of Fafnir Rann’s life. The world around him is a chaos of movement and noise, and the span of that world is no greater than the range of his axes. Nothing exists outside that reach.

And inside it, everything is compressed into a hyper-dense mass of sound and smoke, and movement that refuses to stay still or even slow down. The frenzy binds him in place; jolting armour, blades, geysers of blood, tempests of flesh-eating ash, the daemon-howl of war distilled to its most intense essence.

The frenzy without him is matched by the frenzy within, beneath his flesh, in his heart and meat and bones and mind. Nothing is stable or calm. He has no thoughts, no memories, no hopes, for there is no longer any space for them in his head. Reactive instinct, amplified by necessity, has pushed all of those things out of his skull. He is no longer thinking. He is no longer able to think, or compose himself, or process rationally. The feral, killer part of him, so perfectly trained and obedient, has been let off its leash. It is his only friend. It is the only reason he is still alive. It has become him, and he

has become it.

He is landing killing or maiming blows at a rate of two or three every few seconds. There is never just one foe. Multiple attacks burst over him, calculated assaults, or accidental collisions caused by the maelstrom swirl. His axes, the *Headsman* and the *Hunter*, are notched and blunt from use. He is carrying more wounds than he can count, blood streaming over his armour and seeping inside to fill his undersuit. His metabolism cannot close the wounds fast enough. He cannot see Halen or Baldwin or Namahi or any of the others who were on the fighting step with him when the rush came. There is no longer a Hasgard Fort, ruined or otherwise. There is only this tiny patch of Terra, a mire of blood and a monsoon of trauma, and he occupies it as a statue occupies its plinth. It is like a square on a gaming board, and he the playing piece upon it, and all the other squares, and the rest of the board, have disintegrated. This is his part of the Throneworld, this is his Terra entire. He will not move off it, or take a backward step. He will protect it, and fight for it, and fight *on* it, until he dies on it, and the blood-soaked mud sucks him down and makes it his grave. His piece of Terra and his fight for Terra have become the same small thing.

The enemy is a permanent, unremitting fact, a constant of his tiny world that doesn't stop, like gravity or light. It invades his Terra, and he kills it, but it is already invading again. It is always in front of him, and beside him, and behind him, crashing into him. There is always an axe, a mace, a sword, a hand, a face, a claw.

If he stopped to think about it for a moment, Rann would realise that this intensity cannot last for ever. It has probably only been… ten minutes since the creation of his world. The fury will end when he ends. The world will end with him. He would know, if he took the time to consider it, that he has fifteen or twenty seconds of life left. Those seconds will last a lifetime, and they will form the arc of his existence.

But he does not know this, because there is no space left in the world for thought.

Fafnir Rann, though he does not know this either, is just four axe-lengths away from Zephon Sorrow-Bringer, who is contained within his own, identical world. Zephon's hell is about to end in an entirely different way.

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Into the fire

The Orion gunship leaves the tower about sixty seconds before the tower dies.

Something is pulling down all the watchtowers of the Southern Hem. Hassan never sees it, not fully, not completely. He knows it is a Neverborn beast, and he knows it is of a magnitude greater than even the vast behemoths he has glimpsed on the leading edge of the traitor host. As they flee up-tower, he is aware of its shadow, the shockwave of its assault, the stone-cracking volume of its bellow. He will remember the flash of its eye at the window port for the rest of his life.

His life does not have long to run. Raja secures the gunship on one of the tower's upper landing platforms, where it has apparently been abandoned by retreating forces. There is no time to run a pre-flight, or check its systems. The tower is already beginning to slope, and the thunder of falling rubble has become constant. Hassan sees the dents and grazes on the gunship's golden hull as he follows the Sisters aboard, the three Astartes securing the hatch behind him.

The Orion is a Custodes craft, infamous across the Imperium for its power.

Its technologies are some of the most advanced known to man. The internal fittings of the passenger section are positively regal, and built for post-human dimensions. There are sets of secondary restraints to secure standard human occupants in the large, leather-padded thrones. With Raja at the helm, the gunship lifts off the rubble-strewn deck where everything is beginning to slide. They are nearly two kilometres above street level.

There is a reason the gunship was left on the pad. Its engines belch and fail less than five seconds after launch. Lift systems wail in protest. The drive-engines sputter and grind as Raja attempts reignition. It falls, rather than flies, a tiny golden toy spinning towards the burning streets below. That's what Hassan pictures. There are no windows in the passenger section, but Hassan can feel the centrifugal drag of the death spin. He doesn't need to know which way is 'down' because he can feel it in the sick, disembowelling haul of his gut. He feels the wrench of G-forces paddle and knead the flesh of his face. He and the Sisters are strapped in, but the Astartes are thrown against the rear partition, and pinned.

He sees gleaming spots of blood on the leather upholstery of his oversized seat. It's his blood. He's taken a cut or injury somewhere. The drops quiver with the rotation and the g-force pull. They start to run, first down, then up again, then around, moving with the spin, pausing, starting, trickling. They seem to be making some tight, invisible knot of a design, as though drawn by an invisible hand. It's like a little diagram, a plan. A sigil, transposing meaning and information into a symbolic form. He thinks he should know what the sigil represents, because sigils are the tools of his craft. The droplets of blood seem to be describing the convolutions of a small labyrinth, with no way in and no way out.

But it's just blood on leather, and he's fixating on it so he can block out the terror and tumult of his final moments.

The cabin lighting fails. Now he can't even see the faces of the people he's going to die with. He can see nothing. He can feel every weight-per-unit-mass of it.

He hears a bang as loud as a concussion grenade and mistakes it for impact. But his life continues. The bang was the dirty detonation of a final forced restart. Raja brings the nose up. Hassan doesn't want to know how close to the ground they got. The clawing g-force of the climb is worse than the hideous descent.

‘Hold on,’ Raja snarls.

For what? Hassan wonders. His hands are already rigor-mortis-locked to the armrests. He’s trying to keep the involuntary vomit in his mouth. What could possibly warrant a warning now?

The climbing gunship rocks violently. Not turbulence. Hassan hears the squeal of tortured metal from the exterior hull. He hears a shriek… No, a cry, the cawing shrill of a seabird or hawk. The sky above the Sanctum has swirled with bat-winged things for hours, the carrion birds of hell circling the kill-site. He pictures their craft under attack, harried by Neverborn things with leathery wings and vulture beaks, a falcon mobbed by crows.

Something metallic tears. The gunship lurches. They start to drop again at a rate that is not pilot-intended.

They survived the first plunge. They will not survive a second.

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8:xx

Sixty-three seconds

Sixty-three seconds into the fight, Constantin’s company encounters the first opposition that isn’t Neverborn.

His Sentinel force, which has been cut down over the course of one unnaturally lingering minute to a mere thirty-six warriors, has opened into a wide fan formation. Their pace is swift. Under other operational circumstances, it might even be deemed hasty, especially for a woefully reduced unit pushing into a proven zone mortalis. But it is not headlong, nor is it reckless. They are following their king’s call to arms.

Those who may hear me, join me now.

The Emperor seldom speaks directly. When He does, there is no question of hesitation. They will track His neurosynergetic cry to its source before its echoes die away.

So the Custodes move with fluid precision, with inhuman stealth and speed, flanking and counter-covering intuitively as they penetrate the curious stone ruins and derelict streets that protrude from the thick layer of ashy dust. Constantin’s synergetic orchestration is intense. He has a plan. It is clear in his mind, so it is clear in the minds of his men too. He might as

well have drawn it for them on a strategium table or a wall. They will enact it, as surely and reflexively as the limbs and digits of his own body.

The targets come up in a sudden flurry of marker icons on their helmet displays. One or two at first, then dozens, then hundreds, lighting up across the digitally composed render of the terrain ahead. A disciplined and well-executed combat spread has deployed through the ruins to counter their rapid approach.

Constantin recognises the signature of the disposition before the icons fully resolve. An Astartes repulse formation. Four layers, with lateral flanking.

The multiplying tags resolve. The names on most are pixelated or indecipherable, but the unit registries are clear. XVII Legion, Word Bearers. XVI Legion, Sons of Horus.

Mass-reactives start to shriek at them. The Custodians of Anabasis do not break stride. They maintain their gruelling rate of advance, despite the storm of bolt-rounds thumping and chewing into the stonework around them, or squealing past their heads. Constantin's men don't have the numbers. They don't have anything *near* the numbers of the traitor-sons drawing down to oppose them. But they have the momentum of their speed, and they are Custodes.

They push into the ruins, under fire, without diminishing their pace, and begin to engage at will. The area ahead is an extensive pattern of urban ruins, but one kilometre out and to their left those ruins shelve beneath a huge and mangled structure that must be a portion of fallen orbital plate. Those ragged cliffs of plasteel are the only things in the area that pass for high ground.

The kill-tally starts to mount as the Custodians engage directly. The marker tags on their displays wink out and go grey, the tags of men without names, or men whose names have been corrupted and lost.

Men who are no longer men.

The pitch of combat increases rapidly. Constantin isn't surprised at all. Some of these enemies are Sons of Horus. He respects the XVI, though he would never admit it. They are one of the few Astartes orders he considers to be truly dangerous, especially when commanded by a significant and capable officer. This is not a reflection of the XVI's treacherous track record during the Heresy War. Constantin has held this evaluation since the

first weeks of the Great Crusade.

They are sixty-four seconds into the fight.

Constantin has lost two men. His men have claimed thirteen kills. Their advance has not decelerated. He leaps a broken stone wall, and adds two more of the XVI to his company kill-count, his spear gutting one and then all but decapitating the second. The Sons of Horus legionary stumbles away, hands clamped to his torn-out throat, unable to stem the hosing arterial spray. Constantin doesn’t bother to watch him fall. He knows the man is dead.

He has just identified a marker tag among a cluster near the top of the ruined orbital plate nine hundred metres away. Unlike those around it, it is not garbled or corrupted. The name and rank are perfectly clear.

First Captain Abaddon.

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8:xxi

Among the dead

Rogal Dorn begins to clamber his way over the rubble, the broken wall behind him. He enters the city.

It is not a city any more. It was once, and perhaps for a very long time. Now it's a sea of rubble; rubble rising into cresting waves, rubble sloping into deep troughs. The only features remaining are the few great walls still partially standing, like the one behind him. They are massive, defensive bulwarks, built to contain and protect, but they keep nothing out now. They are a memory of strength, a relic of defiance. The sea of rubble, the walls and the air itself are grey with dust. The sky is an ink-shot darkness that ribbons and blooms with livid pink lightning. The forks spark and sear above him.

The city, whatever it was, has yielded. Rogal Dorn wonders who planned and built it. It is impossible to discern the scheme of defence now. He has a feeling that more human thought and energy went into its obliteration, dismantling it block by block into a sea of stones, than went into its design. He has a feeling that no human thought went into its design at all.

There is no one outside to greet him, no one waiting for him. He will have

to make a new plan, starting here. The city may have yielded, but he has not.

He needs weapons. That's the first thing. The call for help was urgent, and he can't help if he can't fight. If war tore this city down, there will be traces of it in the rubble, its teeth and claws left in the wounds. A sword, perhaps; an axe, a hammer… Even a post or pole will do. Something hard that he can swing.

He hasn't gone far when he begins to find the dead. Armoured men, tangled in their hundreds. They look like rubble at first, because they are so caked in grey dust, but he sees the shapes of limbs, of beaked helmets, of breastplates and pauldrons, jump packs, greaves. When he stoops and wipes the film of dust away, he reveals the traces of gold laurels, of auramite decoration.

Of yellow plate.

Of the numeral VII.

They are all here, all of his sons, all of the men from his Anabasis company. Whatever war overtook and obliterated them, it was total. He scrapes the dirt from rank medallions and insignia, and peels back visors. He sees the pinched, pale faces of the extinct. He remembers names: Argust, Loemid, Hexas, Tibernus…

Each name replenishes another cell of his memory, bringing back events, and encounters, conversations and triumphs. The past drips back into his mind like drops of ink falling into water.

His grief hangs in the air for a while, like dust.

But he is not here to grieve, nor will he allow grief to defeat him where those centuries in the desert and the whispers of the red did not. He is Rogal Dorn, defiant and unyielding.

The red did this.

The red will know his vengeance. There is nothing more dangerous than a man with nothing to lose.

He finds his Huscarl, the leader of his company, a little way apart, prone on a wave of rubble, like a piece of shipwreck being borne out to sea. From his posture and position, it seems as though he was the last to die. Rogal Dorn kneels beside him. He says his name.

'Diamantis.'

Again, grief wells and tries to overcome him. He does not yield. Diamantis

has left him a gift. It is half-buried in the dust and stones beside him. Rogal Dorn digs it out. The greatsword is a powerblade, a mighty two-hander in Diamantis' fists. In Rogal Dorn's hand, it is but a heavy spatha. Its tongue is blackened, but its edge is still fine. He lights it, and the flash of power burns dust off the blade, and reveals a brand of gleaming silver that dances with blue discharge.

'This, I will bury in the heart of the red,' swears Rogal Dorn, bringing the sword to his brow in a salute, in the manner of the Templars. 'This, I will wield against my brother to avenge my sons.'

He rises. The coral lightning above him peals its rage, mocking his oath. It can mock all it likes. He is free, and he has a sword.

He stands and listens for the echo of the call so he can determine which direction to go. He can just make out the dying ring of it on the wind.

And something else.

A tapping. A scratching. As soft and small as the scrabble of a mouse. It's not the stir of dust, nor is it the loose rubble settling behind him.

There's something else alive.

He hunts for it, straining to hear. It's coming from a mound of rubble close to the bone-field where his sons lie. It's a slope of rubble that has spilled down from a split in one of the bulwark walls. It could even be the wall he broke through to get here, the rubble that he spilled breaking free. He isn't sure. He can't tell the broken walls apart any more.

Rogal Dorn plants the sword-tip in the dust, and starts to toss the blocks and stones aside. The largest weigh close to a tonne. He digs down, careful not to let the whole slope slide and re-bury itself. He uses, instinctively, his understanding of mass and balance to shore up the excavation as he deepens it, wedging slabs into the lip of the cavity he is making, fortifying the pit to prevent collapse.

And that's how he finds her.

She stares up at him blindly from the rubble as he uncovers her. She is caked in blood, and the dust that adheres to that blood. Her fingertips are bloody raw from scratching at the stones, frantic to escape her premature burial.

It's a wonder that every bone in her body isn't broken.

'Don't move,' he murmurs. 'I'll dig you free. You move, and you might shake it all loose.'

‘Yes,’ she says in a tiny, dry voice.

‘Do you know who I am?’ he asks.

‘You are Rogal Dorn, Praetorian, primarch of the Imperial Fists, seventh-found son, defiant and unyielding,’ says Actae.

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8:xxii

Leavetaking

Oll takes a deep breath, and fills his lungs. The air is remarkably fresh, as though it has been purified by the immense release of energy. When the Emperor exhaled the power of the Dark King, this place, the seat of that detonation, was purged and stilled, all immaterial tumult extinguished. For about a kilometre in every direction, the plain of white dust is still and unblemished, like freshly fallen snow. There is no wreckage, no footprints. The air is like glass, without a mote of dust or dirt, the light bright, the sky directly above him a cool black. It may be, he thinks, the one place left on Earth where Chaos has no dominion. It possesses the pristine tranquillity of a lunar landscape.

He checks his lasrifle. It is in perfect order, manufactory fresh. It's the same Mars-pattern Mk II he salvaged from the munition wagon on that displaced street, but it's no longer a reconditioned antique with worn grips and the patina of long service on its metalwork. The chrome gleams, and he can smell the clean gun oil that was applied in the forge that assembled it. It is no longer a battered veteran.

Neither is he. Oll can't believe how fit he feels, how vital. He had become

used to the various pangs and twinges of his enduring body, the ache of old wounds on cold days, the stiffness in his joints. Though he might age more slowly than most, he has still aged. Now, the wear and tear of centuries has gone. The trace of old scars has vanished. Even his eyesight has improved. He's never felt so strong and able. He doesn't think he's ever felt so young, not even long, long ago, when he actually was young.

John clearly feels it too. Grammaticus is nearby, walking around, flexing and milling his arms, talking aloud to himself to simply enjoy the fact that he can speak again. Occasionally, he laughs. It makes Oll smile. They are both miraculously renewed. They are in peak condition, the best shape of their lives.

They're going to have to be. A kilometre away, and in every direction, the tranquillity of this sunlit place ends, and the broiling warp storms begin, a dark miasma of lightning and churning clouds banked ten kilometres high. They have achieved the impossible. Now they have to do it all over again. Somewhere out there is Horus Lupercal, and he must be confronted and stopped.

Oll glances towards the Emperor. The Master of Mankind, a golden colossus, is standing some fifty metres away. Caecaltus and the Astartes, Leetu and Garviel Loken, are kneeling before Him, heads bowed. Oll presumes they are pledging some oath of moment to Him before the final act begins. He wonders what they can all do, between them. The Astartes are strong, superhumanly strong, and so is the formidable Proconsul Dusk. Oll and John have certain talents, but Oll doubts either of them will be much real use when it comes down to it. They'll do whatever they can, anyway.

It's the Emperor who matters. He is the only one who counts. Oll knows He's powerful, powerful on a scale that can't be calibrated. But Horus is…

Horus *is*.

The Old Four, the damned Old Four, have weaponised him. All of Chaos is channelled into him. Can anything match that? Without the hideous strength of the Dark King, the Emperor may not be enough. One salvation has cancelled out another. The Emperor has discarded the power that would have assured His triumph. For the right and *best* reasons, but even so…

What was it the Luna Wolf said? 'Better to fight daemons as men than become them.' Yeah. That may well become their epitaph.

The proconsul is approaching, leaving fresh footprints in the immaculate white dust.

‘It is time for you to go, Ollanius,’ says Caecaltus Dusk.

‘Go?’ Oll replies with a frown. ‘Go where?’

‘My King-of-Ages wishes you good fortune,’ the proconsul answers. ‘We part company here. You and Grammaticus must go back.’

Hearing his name, John joins them.

‘We’re setting out, then?’ he asks, almost eager.

‘We go to face Lupercal,’ says Caecaltus. ‘You and Ollanius are going back.’

‘Wait. What? No. We’re coming with you,’ John insists.

‘John’s right,’ says Oll. ‘We’ve come this far. We’re not afraid, proconsul. We intend to see this through.’

The Sentinel slowly shakes his head.

‘Yes, you must see this through,’ he says. ‘Which is why you must go back.’

Oll and John exchange perplexed looks.

Oll steps past the solemn Sentinel. The great, golden figure of mankind’s master is already walking away, flanked by Loken and Leetu. The Emperor takes one last look back at Oll, nods His head, and then continues on His way. With His Astartes at His heels, He strides out across the white and unmarked dust.

‘Wait!’ Oll cries. ‘Just *wait–*’

‘My king expects you to appreciate the situation rationally, Ollanius,’ the Sentinel says. ‘Neither of you can move as swiftly as us, and neither of you are capable of surviving the ordeal ahead. You must go no further. You must go back. If my king can secure the future, then a place is reserved for you in it. A crucial place, Ollanius. Meanwhile, my king needs you to live.’

‘His concern for us is touching, but I told you. We’re not afraid–’

‘My king’s concern for you is not personal. You cannot die. You *must not* die.’

‘Everyone dies eventually, Dusk,’ Oll says.

‘Ollanius,’ the proconsul says. There is a sharpness in his voice now, and it’s not his voice anyway. ‘You persuaded my king to examine the logic of His position. Show Him the respect of doing the same.’

Oll glowers, and wipes dust from his lips with the back of his hand. A

wind is picking up suddenly, and it's starting to lift the white dust in a haze. The tranquillity of the place is dissolving as the warp creeps back in and reclaims it. The receding figures of the Emperor and the two Astartes are beginning to lose definition.

'We came to help Him, proconsul,' Oll says sadly.

'Then do so,' replies Caecaltus. 'With the same determination you have shown thus far. Your purpose is to face Him, and speak truth to His power, as only one who has known Him for all of the ages can. You change the pattern of history, and the course of fate. You avert one damnation. Now you must complete that purpose, while He averts another.'

'Complete…?' Oll stammers.

'Oh!' says John suddenly. 'Oh, shit. He's right. We've got to finish it. Oll… Oll, listen to me. If we go with them, and we die, which, let's be honest, is likely, then we'll never get here to do what we've just done.'

'You've both gone mad!' Oll exclaims.

'Grammaticus sees it,' says Caecaltus Dusk. 'His gift for languages and their tenses, no doubt. Ollanius, you have to make this possible. You have to complete the circle.'

He holds the ball of twine out to Oll.

Oll blinks at it for a second.

'Ah damn it,' he whispers. 'You mean *literally*…'

'You must retrace your steps, and leave the clues that you have followed, or this branch of history will collapse. Go leave the trail your earlier self followed, for without it, you would not have been here to change my king's destiny.'

Oll stares at the ball of twine. John reaches forward, and takes it from the Sentinel.

'We don't have a choice, Oll,' John says. 'We've got to do this, or everything we've done will be undone.'

'A loop,' murmurs Oll.

'A loop of thread,' says Caecaltus. 'A vital one.'

He turns without another word or gesture of farewell, and starts to follow the others. He is lost in the rising dust in a matter of moments.

Alone, John and Oll look at each other.

'Come on,' says John.

'This feels wrong,' says Oll.

‘It does, but we both know it’s right. We have to finish Hebet’s work, and leave the threads. We have to go all the way back to the start, Oll, and make damn sure what’s done *stays* done.’

Oll nods. He takes one last look, but all four figures have disappeared from view.

Squinting into the wind and dust, Oll and John trudge in the opposite direction. Four sets of footprints lead away on one course, two on another. Within seconds, the rising wind has erased them all entirely.

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The death

It takes just a moment, though he has all the time in the world.

Horus Lupercal holds all of time, stilled, in one hand, and Sanguinius in the other.

Sanguinius, broken beyond measure, gazes up at the soaring arches of the Lupercal Court. Even broken, he will not go quietly. Even broken, he will not make this easy.

Lupercal growls. Does he relish this? Hate it? Consider it an annoying waste of time when he has better things to do? There is no way to fathom him, for he is no longer remotely human.

And Sanguinius doesn't care. He can feel the gaze of the Old Four on him, staring from the shadows with eyes as bleak and wicked as the one adorning his brother's breastplate. They have come to witness this, this and everything that will follow. They mutter to each other excitedly and, around them, the numberless legions of their spawn gibber and whisper in delight. Sanguinius can feel the sheer size of them, the mass of the Dark Gods. He will show them the defiance of mankind to his last breath.

Horus lifts him off the ground, pincered in his Talon. Every fractured bone

and tear in Sanguinius' body shrieks as he hangs there. Blood blurts from between his torn lips, squeezed out of his body. *Worldbreaker* rises in the monster's other hand.

Sanguinius lashes out with his left hand, gouging desperate fingers at his brother's cheek and eyes. Horus barks in rage, and drops his prey. Sanguinius falls onto his knees, jarring every wound, then topples onto his side. He tries to rise, trembling, weak. He wants to be on his feet when it happens. He wants to be standing when–

Worldbreaker catches him before he is even back on his knees. The clubbing blow breaks his left shoulder, ribs and left femur. He collapses, trying not to scream from the pain, and failing. Horus starts to bludgeon him, beating him repeatedly like a disobedient dog. There is no art in this any more. No martial skill. No patience. *Worldbreaker* shreds armour and flesh. It pulverises both collarbones. It ruptures a lung. A fine drizzle of blood fumes the air around the two figures, the brutal, beating giant and his prey. The sixth hammering impact twists Sanguinius' head around,- shattering his jaw, and transmitting such force that the skin on the left half of his face, from brow to chin, is flayed loose. It flutters, then drapes back like a slack mask.

As he falls forward, the Talon vices him again. It lifts the ruined, tattered Angel into the air, until he is face to face with the first-found instrument of Chaos.

Horus squeezes slowly. He is expecting some last word, some immortal and heroic declaration to mark the end of a majestic, noble life. It ought to be something good, something appropriate.

But Sanguinius is no longer capable of speech. He is drowning in his own blood.

The claws close. There is a double crack of spine and neck.

Horus waits. Blood drips. It's done.

The Talon opens with a mechanical clack. His brother's corpse, so loose and mangled it seems almost boneless, drops to the deck. An ugly sound of impact to mark an ugly ending.

Horus sighs and walks away. Things scurry forward from the shadows to nail the body up.

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TO BE CONCLUDED IN
THE END AND THE DEATH: VOLUME III

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An extract from *Dawn of Fire: Avenging Son*.

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‘I was there at the Siege of Terra,’ Vitrian Messinius would say in his later years.

‘I was there…’ he would add to himself, his words never meant for ears but his own. ‘I was there the day the Imperium died.’

But that was yet to come.

‘To the walls! To the walls! The enemy is coming!’ Captain Messinius, as he was then, led his Space Marines across the Penitent’s Square high up on the Lion’s Gate. ‘Another attack! Repel them! Send them back to the warp!’

Thousands of red-skinned monsters born of fear and sin scaled the outer ramparts, fury and murder incarnate. The mortals they faced quailed. It took the heart of a Space Marine to stand against them without fear, and the Angels of Death were in short supply.

‘Another attack, move, move! To the walls!’

They came in the days after the Avenging Son returned, emerging from nothing, eight legions strong, bringing the bulk of their numbers to bear against the chief entrance to the Imperial Palace. A decapitation strike like no other, and it came perilously close to success.

Messinius’ Space Marines ran to the parapet edging the Penitent’s Square. On many worlds, the square would have been a plaza fit to adorn the centre of any great city. Not on Terra. On the immensity of the Lion’s Gate, it was nothing, one of hundreds of similarly huge spaces. The word ‘gate’ did not suit the scale of the cityscape. The Lion’s Gate’s bulk marched up into the sky, step by titanic step, until it rose far higher than the mountains it had supplanted. The gate had been built by the Emperor Himself, they said. Myths detailed the improbable supernatural feats required to raise it. They were lies, all of them, and belittled the true effort needed to build such an

edifice. Though the Lion’s Gate was made to His design and by His command, the soaring monument had been constructed by mortals, with mortal hands and mortal tools. Messinius wished that had been remembered. For men to build this was far more impressive than any godly act of creation. If men could remember that, he believed, then perhaps they would remember their own strength.

The uncanny may not have built the gate, but it threatened to bring it down. Messinius looked over the rampart lip, down to the lower levels thousands of feet below and the spread of the Anterior Barbican.

Upon the stepped fortifications of the Lion’s Gate was armour of every colour and the blood of every loyal primarch. Dozens of regiments stood alongside them. Aircraft filled the sky. Guns boomed from every quarter. In the churning redness on the great roads, processional ways so huge they were akin to prairies cast in rockcrete, were flashes of gold where the Emperor’s Custodian Guard battled. The might of the Imperium was gathered there, in the palace where He dwelt.

There seemed moments on that day when it might not be enough.

The outer ramparts were carpeted in red bodies that writhed and heaved, obscuring the great statues adorning the defences and covering over the guns, an invasive cancer consuming reality. The enemy were legion. There were too many foes to defeat by plan and ruse. Only guns, and will, would see the day won, but the defenders were so pitifully few.

Messinius called a wordless halt, clenched fist raised, seeking the best place to deploy his mixed company, veterans all of the Terran Crusade. Gunships and fighters sped overhead, unleashing deadly light and streams of bombs into the packed daemonic masses. There were innumerable cannons crammed onto the gate, and they all fired, rippling the structure with false earthquakes. Soon the many ships and orbital defences of Terra would add their guns, targeting the very world they were meant to guard, but the attack had come so suddenly; as yet they had had no time to react.

The noise was horrendous. Messinius’ audio dampers were at maximum and still the roar of ordnance stung his ears. Those humans that survived today would be rendered deaf. But he would have welcomed more guns, and louder still, for all the defensive fury of the assailed palace could not drown out the hideous noise of the daemons – their sighing hisses, a billion serpents strong, and chittering, screaming wails. It was not only heard but

sensed within the soul, the realms of spirit and of matter were so intertwined. Messinius' being would be forever stained by it.

Tactical information scrolled down his helmplate, near environs only. He had little strategic overview of the situation. The vox-channels were choked with a hellish screaming that made communication impossible. The noosphere was disrupted by etheric backwash spilling from the immaterial rifts the daemons poured through. Messinius was used to operating on his own. Small-scale, surgical actions were the way of the Adeptus Astartes, but in a battle of this scale, a lack of central coordination would lead inevitably to defeat. This was not like the first Siege, where his kind had fought in Legions.

He called up a company-wide vox-cast and spoke to his warriors. They were not his Chapter-kin, but they would listen. The primarch himself had commanded that they do so.

'Reinforce the mortals,' he said. 'Their morale is wavering. Position yourselves every fifty yards. Cover the whole of the south-facing front. Let them see you.' He directed his warriors by chopping at the air with his left hand. His right, bearing an inactive power fist, hung heavily at his side. 'Assault Squad Antiocles, back forty yards, single firing line. Prepare to engage enemy breakthroughs only on my mark. Devastators, split to demi-squads and take up high ground, sergeant and sub-squad prime's discretion as to positioning and target. Remember our objective, heavy infliction of casualties. We kill as many as we can, we retreat, then hold at the Penitent's Arch until further notice. Command squad, with me.'

Command squad was too grand a title for the mismatched crew Messinius had gathered around himself. His own officers were light years away, if they still lived.

'Doveskamor, Tidominus,' he said to the two Aurora Marines with him. 'Take the left.'

'Yes, captain,' they voxed, and jogged away, their green armour glinting orange in the hell-light of the invasion.

The rest of his scratch squad was comprised of a communications specialist from the Death Spectres, an Omega Marine with a penchant for plasma weaponry, and a Raptor holding an ancient standard he'd taken from a dusty display.

'Why did you take that, Brother Kryvesh?' Messinius asked, as they

moved forward.

‘The palace is full of such relics,’ said the Raptor. ‘It seems only right to put them to use. No one else wanted it.’

Messinius stared at him.

‘What? If the gate falls, we’ll have more to worry about than my minor indiscretion. It’ll be good for morale.’

The squads were splitting to join the standard humans. Such was the noise many of the men on the wall had not noticed their arrival, and a ripple of surprise went along the line as they appeared at their sides. Messinius was glad to see they seemed more firm when they turned their eyes back outwards.

‘Anzigus,’ he said to the Death Spectre. ‘Hold back, facilitate communication within the company. Maximum signal gain. This interference will only get worse. See if you can get us patched in to wider theatre command. I’ll take a hardline if you can find one.’

‘Yes, captain,’ said Anzigus. He bowed a helm that was bulbous with additional equipment. He already had the access flap of the bulky vox-unit on his arm open. He withdrew, the aerials on his power plant extending. He headed towards a systems nexus on the far wall of the plaza, where soaring buttresses pushed back against the immense weight bearing down upon them.

Messinius watched him go. He knew next to nothing about Anzigus. He spoke little, and when he did, his voice was funereal. His Chapter was mysterious, but the same lack of familiarity held true for many of these warriors, thrown together by miraculous events. Over their years lost wandering in the warp, Messinius had come to see some as friends as well as comrades, others he hardly knew, and none he knew so well as his own Chapter brothers. But they would stand together. They were Space Marines. They had fought by the returned primarch’s side, and in that they shared a bond. They would not stint in their duty now.

Messinius chose a spot on the wall, directing his other veterans to left and right. Kryvesh he sent to the mortal officer’s side. He looked down again, out past the enemy and over the outer palace. Spires stretched away in every direction. Smoke rose from all over the landscape. Some of it was new, the work of the daemon horde, but Terra had been burning for weeks. The Astronomican had failed. The galaxy was split in two. Behind them in

the sky turned the great palace gyre, its deep eye marking out the throne room of the Emperor Himself.

‘Sir!’ A member of the Palatine Guard shouted over the din. He pointed downwards, to the left. Messinius followed his wavering finger. Three hundred feet below, daemons were climbing. They came upwards in a triangle tipped by a brute with a double rack of horns. It clambered hand over hand, far faster than should be possible, flying upwards, as if it touched the side of the towering gate only as a concession to reality. A Space Marine with claw locks could not have climbed that fast.

‘Soldiers of the Imperium! The enemy is upon us!’

He looked to the mortals. Their faces were blanched with fear. Their weapons shook. Their bravery was commendable nonetheless. Not one of them attempted to run, though a wave of terror preceded the unnatural things clambering up towards them.

‘We shall not turn away from our duty, no matter how fearful the foe, or how dire our fates may be,’ he said. ‘Behind us is the Sanctum of the Emperor Himself. As He has watched over you, now it is your turn to stand in guardianship over Him.’

The creatures were drawing closer. Through a sliding, magnified window on his display, Messinius looked into the yellow and cunning eyes of their leader. A long tongue lolled permanently from the thing’s mouth, licking at the wall, tasting the terror of the beings it protected.

Boltgun actions clicked. His men leaned over the parapet, towering over the mortals as the Lion’s Gate towered over the Ultimate Wall. A wealth of targeting data was exchanged, warrior to warrior, as each chose a unique mark. No bolt would be wasted in the opening fusillade. They could hear the creatures’ individual shrieks and growls, all wordless, but their meaning was clear: blood, blood, blood. Blood and skulls.

Messinius sneered at them. He ignited his power fist with a swift jerk. He always preferred the visceral thrill of manual activation. Motors came to full life. Lightning crackled around it. He aimed downwards with his bolt pistol. A reticule danced over diabolical faces, each a copy of all the others. These things were not real. They were not alive. They were projections of a false god. The Librarian Atramo had named them maladies. A spiritual sickness wearing ersatz flesh.

He reminded himself to be wary. Contempt was as thick as any armour, but

these things were deadly, for all their unreality.

He knew. He had fought the Neverborn many times before.

‘While He lives,’ Messinius shouted, boosting his voxmitter gain to maximal, ‘we stand!’

‘For He of Terra!’ the humans shouted, their battle cry loud enough to be heard over the booming of guns.

‘For He of Terra,’ said Messinius. ‘Fire!’ he shouted.

The Space Marines fired first. Boltguns spoke, spitting spikes of rocket flare into the foe. Bolts slammed into daemon bodies, bursting them apart. Black viscera exploded away. Black ichor showered those coming after. The daemons’ false souls screamed back whence they came, though their bones and offal tumbled down like those of any truly living foe.

Las-beams speared next, and the space between the wall top and the scaling party filled with violence. The daemons were unnaturally resilient, protected from death by the energies of the warp, and though many were felled, others weathered the fire, and clambered up still, unharmed and uncaring of their dead. Messinius no longer needed his helm’s magnification to see into the daemon champion’s eyes. It stared at him, its smile a promise of death. The terror that preceded them was replaced by the urge to violence, and that gripped them all, foe and friend. The baseline humans began to lose their discipline. A man turned and shot his comrade, and was shot down in turn. Kryvesh banged the foot of his borrowed banner and called them back into line. Elsewhere, his warriors sang; not their Chapter warsongs, but battle hymns known to all. Wavering human voices joined them. The feelings of violence abated, just enough.

Then the things were over the parapet and on them. Messinius saw-Tidominus carried down by a group of daemons, his unit signum replaced by a mortis rune in his helm. The enemy champion was racing at him. Messinius emptied his bolt pistol into its face, blowing half of it away into a fine mist of daemonic ichor. Still it leapt, hurling itself twenty feet over the parapet. Messinius fell back, keeping the creature in sight, targeting skating over his helmplate as the machine-spirit tried to maintain a target lock. Threat indicators trilled, shifting up their priority spectrum.

The daemon held up its enormous gnarled hands. Smoke whirled in the space between, coalescing into a two-handed sword almost as tall as Messinius. By the time its hoofed feet cracked the paving slabs of the

square, the creature's weapon was solid. Vapour streaming from its ruined face, it pointed the broadsword at Messinius and hissed a wordless challenge.

'Accepted,' said Messinius, and moved in to attack.

The creature was fast, and punishingly strong. Messinius parried its first strike with an outward push of his palm, fingers spread. Energy crackled. The boom generated by the meeting of human technology and the sorceries of the warp was loud enough to out-compete the guns, but though the impact sent pain lancing up Messinius' arm, the daemon was not staggered, and pressed in a follow-up attack, swinging the massive sword around its head as if it weighed nothing.

Messinius countered more aggressively this time, punching in to the strike. Another thunderous detonation. Disruption fields shattered matter, but the daemon was not wholly real, and the effect upon it was lesser than it would be upon a natural foe. Nevertheless, this time it was thrown backwards by the blow. Smoke poured from the edge of its blade. It licked black blood from its arm and snarled. Messinius was ready when it leapt: opening his fist, ignoring the sword as it clashed against his pauldron and sheared off a peeling of ceramite, he grabbed the beast about its middle.

The Bloodletters of Khorne were rangy things, all bone and ropey muscle, no space within them for organs. The false god of war had no need for them to eat or breathe, or to give the semblance of being able to do so. They were made only to kill, and to strike fear in the hearts of those they faced. Their waists were solid, and slender, and easily encompassed by Messinius' power fist. It squirmed in his grip, throwing Messinius' arm about. Servo motors in his joints locked, supplementary muscle fibres strained, but the White Consul stood firm.

'Tell your master he is not welcome on Terra,' he said. His words were calm, a deliberate defiance of the waves of rage pulsing off the daemon.

He closed his hand.

The daemon's midriff exploded. The top half fell down, still hissing and thrashing. Its sword clanged off the paving and broke into shards, brittle now it was separated from its wielder. They were pieces of the same thing, sword and beast. Apart, the weapon could not survive long.

Messinius cast down the lower portion of the daemon. There were dozens of the things atop the wall, battling with his warriors and the human

soldiery. In the second he paused he saw Doveskamor hacked down as he stood over the body of his brother, pieces of armour bouncing across the ground. He saw a group of Palatine Sentinels corner a daemon with their bayonets. He saw a dozen humans cut down by eldritch swords.

Where the humans kept their distance, their ranged weapons took a toll upon the Neverborn. Where the daemons got among them, they triumphed more often than not, even against his Space Marines. Support fire rained down sporadically from above, its usefulness restricted by the difficulty of picking targets from the swirling melee. At the western edge of the line, the heavy weapons were more telling, knocking daemons off the wall before they crested the parapet and preventing them from circling around the back of the Imperial forces. Only his equipment allowed Messinius to see this. Without the helm feeds of his warriors and the limited access he had to the Lion Gate's auspectoria, he would have been blind, lost in the immediate clash of arms and sprays of blood. He would have remained where he was, fighting. He would not have seen that there were more groups of daemons pouring upwards. He would not have given his order, and then he would have died.

'Squad Antiocles, engage,' he said. He smashed a charging daemon into fragments, yanked another back the instant before it gutted a mortal soldier, and stamped its skull flat, while switching again to his company vox-net. 'All units, fall back to the Penitent's Arch. Take the mortals with you.'

His assault squad fell from the sky on burning jets, kicking daemons down and shooting them with their plasma and bolt pistols. A roar of promethium from a flamer blasted three bloodletters to ash.

'Fall back! Fall back!' Messinius commanded, his words beating time with his blows. 'Assault Squad Antiocles to cover. Devastators maintain overhead fire.'

Squad Antiocles drove the enemy back. Tactical Space Marines were retreating from the parapet, dragging human soldiers with them. An Ultramarine walked backwards past him, firing his bolter one-handed, a wounded member of the Palatine Guard draped over his right shoulder.

'Fall back! Fall back!' Messinius roared. He grabbed a human by the arm and yanked him hard away from the monster trying to slay him, almost throwing him across the square. He pivoted and punched, slamming the man's opponent in the face with a crackling bang that catapulted its broken

corpse over the wall edge. ‘Fall back!’

Mortal soldiers broke and ran while Squad Antiocles held off the foe. Telling to begin with, in moments the assault squad’s momentum was broken, and again more bloodletters were leaping over the edge of the rampart. The Space Marines fired in retreat, covering each other in pairs as they crossed the square diagonally to the Penitent’s Arch. The mortals were getting the idea, running between the Adeptus Astartes and mostly staying out of their fire corridor. With the fight now concentrated around Squad Antiocles, the Devastators were more effective, blasting down the daemons before they could bring their weight of numbers to bear upon Antiocles. Sporadic bursts of fire from the retreating Tactical Marines added to the effect, and for a short period the number of daemons entering the square did not increase.

Messinius tarried a moment, rounding up more of the humans who were either too embattled or deaf to his orders to get out. He reached three still firing over the parapet’s edge and pulled them away. A daemon reared over the parapet and he crushed its skull, but a second leapt up and cleaved hard into his fist, and power fled the weapon. Messinius pumped three bolts into its neck, decapitating it. He moved back.

His power fist was ruined. The daemon’s cut had sliced right through the ceramite, breaking the power field generator and most of the weapon’s strength-boosting apparatus, making it a dead weight. He said a quick thanks to the machine’s departed spirit and smashed the top of his bolt pistol against the quick seal release, at the same time disengaging the power feeds by way of neural link. The clamps holding the power fist to his upper arm came loose and it slid to the floor with a clang, leaving his right arm clad in his standard ceramite gauntlet. A century together. A fine weapon. He had no time to mourn it.

‘Fall back!’ he shouted. ‘Fall back to the Penitent’s Arch!’

He slammed a fresh clip into his bolt pistol. Squad Antiocles were being pushed back. The Devastators walked their fire closer in to the combat. A heavy bolter blasted half a dozen daemons into stinking meat. A missile blew, lifting more into the air. Messinius fell back himself now, leaving it to the last moment before ordering the Assault Marines to leap from the fray. Their jets ignited, driving back the daemons with washes of flame, and they lifted up over his head, leaving four of their brothers dead on the ground.

Devastator fire hammered down from above. Anti-personnel weapons set into casemates and swivel turrets on the walls joined in, but the daemons mounted higher and higher in a wave of red that flooded over the parapet.

‘Run!’ he shouted at the straggling human soldiery. ‘Run and survive! Your service is not yet done!’

The Penitent’s Arch led from the square onto a wall walk that curved around to another layer of defences. His Space Marines were already making a firing line across the entrance. A gate could be extended across the arch, sealing the walk from the square, but Messinius refrained from requesting it be closed, as the humans were still streaming past the Adeptus Astartes. Kryvesh waved the banner, whirling it through the air to attract the terrified mortals. The Space Marines fired constantly into the mass of daemons sprinting after them, exhausting their ammunition supplies. Shattered false bodies tumbled down, shot from the front and above, yet still they came, overtaking and dismembering the last warriors fleeing away from the parapet.

Squad Antiocles roared through the arch, landing behind their brethren. Messinius passed between them. For a moment he surveyed the tide of coming fury. Endless red-skinned monsters filling the square like a lake of spilled blood, washing over a score of brightly armoured Space Marine corpses left behind in the retreat. Several hundred humans lay alongside them.

He opened a vox-channel to Gate Command.

‘Wall batteries three-seven-three through three-seven-six, target sector nine five eighty-three, Penitent’s Square, western edge. Five-minute bombardment.’

‘On whose order?’

‘Captain Vitrian Messinius, White Consuls Chapter, Tenth Company. I have the primarch’s authority.’ As he dealt with gunnery control, he was also datapulsing a request for resupply, and checking through layered data screeds.

‘Voice print and signum ident match. Transponder codes valid. We obey.’

The far side of the square erupted in a wall of flame. Heavy cannon shells detonated in a string along the rampart. High-energy beams sliced into the square, turning stone and metal instantly to superheated gas. The approaching daemons were annihilated. A few bolt-rounds cracked off as

the last daemons nearing the Space Marine line were put down.

‘Company, cease fire. Conserve ammunition.’ Nobody heard him. Nobody could. He re-sent the order via vox-script. The boltguns cut out.

Penitent’s Square was a cauldron of fire so intense he could feel the heat through his battleplate’s ceramite. The ground shook under his feet and he considered the possibility that the wall would give way. The noise was so all-consuming the idea of speech lost relevance. For five minutes the Lion’s Gate tore madly at its own hide, ripping out chunks of itself in a bid to scrape free the parasites infesting its fabric, then, as suddenly as it had begun, the bombardment ceased.

Where the Penitent’s Square had been, a twisted mass of black metal and shattered stone remained. So formidable were the defences of the Lion’s Gate that the structure beneath had not been penetrated, but it was like this, in small bursts of destruction, that they could lose this war.

Messinius accessed the gate’s noosphere. No daemons had as yet rounded the projecting Penitent’s Spur to come up against their new position. When the attack came again, which it would, it would come from the front.

An ammunition train raced down the walkway from the fortress interior and came to a squealing stop fifty yards away. Medicae personnel jumped down. A Space Marine Apothecary came with them. Human peons rushed about with heavy sack bags full of bolter magazines, passing them out to the transhumans. Spent magazines clattered to the floor. New ones were slammed home. Messinius contacted his squad leaders, taking a quick census of his surviving men, not trusting the digits that read ‘Company Casualties 23%’ blinking in the upper right of his visual field.

Through the smoke given off by burning metal on the far side of the ruined square, he saw movement. Auspex returns tripped his armour’s machine-spirit, and it blinked warnings in his helm.

<THREAT DETECTED.>

‘They’re coming again,’ he said.

‘My lord?’ A soft voice, one that did not belong in that moment. He ignored it.

‘Engage at fifty-yard range. Make every shot count.’

The ammunition train was hurriedly relieved of their allotted supplies, and

sped off, bearing the worst-wounded, to aid whichever beleaguered unit needed it next.

‘Stand ready.’

‘My lord?’ The voice became more insistent.

The voidships in orbit were beginning to fire. Their targeting systems were perturbed by the boiling warp energy and the vortex in constant motion over the Imperial Palace, and many shots went wide, crashing down into the Anterior Barbican, a few falling as far out as Magnifican.

Red monsters bounded towards them, as numerous as before, as if their efforts to thin them had been for naught.

‘Fire,’ he said coldly.

‘My lord, your duty rotation begins in half an hour. You told me to wake you.’

This time he heard. Bolters boomed. Messinius froze them with a thought, and with another he shut down the hypnomat entirely.

Vitrian Messinius awoke groggily.

‘My lord,’ his servant said. Selwin, he was called. ‘You are returned from your recollections?’

‘I am awake, Selwin, yes,’ Messinius said irritably. His mouth was dry. He wanted to be left alone.

‘Shall I?’ Selwin gestured to the hypnomat.

Messinius nodded and rubbed his face. It felt numb. Selwin flicked a number of toggles on the hypnomat and it powered down, the steady glow of its innards fading to nothing and winking out, taking the immediacy of Messinius’ memories with it.

‘The wall again?’ Selwin asked.

The hypnomat’s primary use was to instil knowledge without active learning on the subject’s part, but it could reawaken memories to be lived again. Full immersion in the hypnomat required cooperation from Messinius’ catalepsean node, and coming out of the half-sleep was never as easy as true waking. Reliving past events dulled his wits. Messinius reminded himself to be guarded. He forgot sometimes that he was not on Sabatine any more. The local saying ‘This is Terra’ encompassed a multitude of sins. Spying was among them.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Personal debriefing.’ He shook his head and unplugged the

hypnomat's input cables from the neural ports set into his arms and neck. 'Nothing new learned.'

Selwin nodded, then hesitantly said, 'If I may be so bold as to ask, why do it, my lord, if you expect to learn nothing?'

'Because I can always be wrong,' Messinius said. He pointed at the hypnomat. It was a bulky machine set on a trolley, but not too big for an unaltered man to move. 'Take that away. Inform my armourer I will be with him in a few minutes.'

Selwin bowed. 'Already done, my lord.'

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